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More Bay Area youths go to college, study says

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Oct. 19--The percentage of Bay Area youths who are qualified to attend college has climbed over the past two years. So have the proportions of Bay Area teens who enroll in college, then go on to graduate.

But this local good news, announced today in a new report by a bipartisan advocacy group, is shadowed by troubling statewide data.

Students in large regions of California are falling behind in the goal of attaining higher education -- a trend which bodes ill for the economic future of the state, according to the report by the Campaign for College Opportunity.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, the number of youths enrolled in college climbed from 39 to 45 percent between 2004 and 2006. College participation rates also increased in the San Diego and Orange County regions. But it declined in largely agricultural regions of North San Joaquin Valley, the Inland Empire and the Upper Sacramento Valley, the study found.

"The bottom line is: We want to issue a very strong warning that if we don't close the gaps in educational attainment in different regions and ethnicities, we will see a decline in the economic health of the state," said Nancy Shulock, who directed the study.

A snapshot of student performance shows that the Bay Area surpasses the state average in every measure. The study found that:

--30 percent of Bay Area eighth graders are proficient in math and 50 percent are proficient in language arts, compared to the state average of 26 percent and 41 percent.

--286 of 1000 Bay Area high schoolers had satisfactory AP test scores, compared with 213 statewide.

--45 percent of Bay Area 11th and 12th graders had studied chemistry and physics, compared to 40 percent statewide. More than 34 percent take advanced math, compared to 28 percent statewide.

--42 percent of Bay Area high school graduates have completed the "A through G" curriculum necessary to enroll in the state's public universities, compared to 35 percent statewide.

--45 percent of Bay Area youth ages 18 to 24 enroll in college, compared to the state average of 39 percent.

The Bay Area's success reflects the demographics of its population, said Shulock, who is also director of Cal State Sacramento's Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy.

"There is a high population of Asian students and a lower population of Latinos, compared to other regions," added researcher Colleen Moore. The Bay Area's high average income and educational level also helps, because these families are more likely to support a college-prep high school curriculum, she said.

The reports cited the much-documented differences among ethnic groups in college attendance and performance. For example, 70 percent of California's Asian American high school graduates go directly to college. That compares with 47 percent of whites, 49 percent of African Americans and 43 percent of Latinos.

The researchers worried that college participation rates could continue to fall in coming years as Latinos account for an increasing portion of the state's students. "The only group that is projected to grow rapidly is Latino, which experiences the lowest level of educational attainment," said Shulock.

The state's job market is expected to change dramatically in the next 15 years, with demand for educated workers significantly outstripping the supply. Manufacturing jobs will continue to slip away, replaced by work in information technology, biotechnology and healthcare -- which require a college degree.

To improve student performance, Shulock and other members of the Campaign urged policymakers to work harder to close the racial and ethnic gaps in high school graduation, college preparation and degree completion.

There should be better coordination between high schools and colleges, with reforms to improve student preparedness. The best predictor of whether a child will complete college is whether he or she is well-prepared and takes a rigorous curriculum in high school, they said.

"We need a much stronger emphasis to get K-12 students prepared for college, then getting high school graduates to enroll directly into college," said Abdi Soltani, executive director of the group, founded by organizations including the California Business Roundtable and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund.

Finally, universities should be better funded, so they can support struggling students.

"We need to make sure that we have the capacity not just to enroll student, but to help them get through and earn credentials," said Shulock.

For More Information: <http://www.collegecampaign.org>

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