

READINESS FOR COLLEGE AND WORK

Chapter Summary

Keeping Illinois competitive requires students to graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in postsecondary education and/or work. Whether the indicator is high school completion rates, readiness for college, or readiness for work, Illinois students who are low-income, black, and/or Hispanic do not fare as well as their white and Asian peers.

The high school completion rates appear to be increasing in Illinois; however, only 70-75% of all of the 9th grade students will complete high school. This percentage is even lower for low-income students, especially the males. In fact, fewer than 50% of the black and Hispanic male students will graduate.

Graduating from high school does not guarantee the student will be prepared for college: only 35-40% of Illinois high school graduates are ready for college-level work according to ACT data. Again, there are disparities among students based on income and ethnicity. Around 65% of the highest-income students are the “most ready” for college, compared to only 20% of the lowest-income students. Less than 11% of the black students and less than 17% of the Hispanic students are prepared for college, compared to 55% of the Asian students and 48% of the white students.

There were great disparities among the percentages of students who completed the ACT Core Curriculum—about 61% of the Asian students, about half of the white students, but only 39% of the Hispanic students and 37.5% of the black students. Completing the core did not guarantee the student was prepared for college.

Illinois students’ performance on the AP tests and the ACT WorkKeys illustrate the two ends of the performance continuum in Illinois. At the top end, Illinois has some of the best students in the nation. For example, Illinois students who sit for Advanced Placement exams do extremely well—71.5% received a college-ready grade compared to only 63% nationally. At the other end of the continuum, 80% of the low-income students were not prepared to succeed in college, and 17% were not qualified for any of the jobs profiled on the ACT WorkKeys.

It is critical that Illinois address the disparity issues tied to low income and ethnicity as a secondary factor. In addition, the knowledge and skills of the high school graduate needs to be better aligned with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in college and the workplace. Requirements for graduating from high school vary markedly from college and workplace expectations.

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