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Fifty cents

West, South See Declines In Graduation Rates

By James H. Ewert Jr.
Special to School Week

Hundreds of Glenbard high school students will walk across the stage, turn their tassels and graduate at the end of this month -- but not all their classmates will join them.

Behind the pomp and circumstance of graduation are some troubling trends: Graduation rates at Glen-

bard West and Glenbard South have dropped to the lowest they have been in at least five years.

Both schools, considered top academic performers, are now in the bottom half of DuPage high schools when it comes to the percent of students graduating, state data show.

In addition, black and Hispanic students across Glenbard Township High School District 87 are graduating at significantly lower rates than their

white peers -- a vexing problem nationally as well as locally.

Across the Glenbard district, the problem has grown worse, with the gap between white and black and Hispanic graduation rates wider in 2007 than five years ago, according to Illinois State Board of Education data broken out by race, gender and other factors. In addition, District 87's low-income and

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Graduation Rates

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learning disabled students have seen steep declines in graduation rates since 2002, the data show.

Glenbard officials point out concerns about the way graduation rates are calculated, saying they don't present a full picture. At the same time, the district is tackling the problem with a number of initiatives, including special intervention and mentoring programs for struggling students, on-line "credit recovery" courses for students who fail required classes, and expanded summer school offerings. For the first time this summer, the district is waiving summer school fees for students who meet low-income guidelines.

For the upcoming school year, the district is working to keep class sizes to no more than 25 students for freshmen, and it is instituting a no-cut policy for freshman athletes, based on a philosophy that students who get involved in sports and extracurricular activities do better academically.

And down the line, the district expects to increase the number of credits required to graduate, currently at 21. Two additional credits — in science and civics — would be required, no earlier than 2009-10.

District 87 Supt. Michael Meissen said he believes that if the district raises its graduation expectations, students will rise to them.

"We want to provide and continue to provide a comprehensive education. Everyone needs 21 credits to graduate and we intend to bump that to 23," Meissen said. "My honest belief is that if you expect more and then provide the supports that the kids will deliver."

This school year, District 87 officials estimate that about 140 students who should be

DUPAGE SCHOOLS: 2007 GRADUATION RATES VS. 2002 GRADUATION RATES

Glenbard South and Glenbard West are considered top academic performers when it comes to measures such as scores on the ACT college-entrance test. Yet their graduation rates have slipped and now rank in the bottom half of DuPage high schools.

DuPage County high school	2002 grad. rate	Rank	DuPage County high school	2007 grad. rate	Rank
Wheaton North High School	100	1	Neuqua Valley High School	100	1
Naperville North High School	99.1	2	Waubonsie Valley High School	99.9	2
Hinsdale Central High School	97.5	3	Wheaton Warrenville South H S	99.8	3
Neuqua Valley High School	96.9	4	Wheaton North High School	98.8	4
Waubonsie Valley High School	95.4	5	Hinsdale Central High School	97	5
Lisle High School	95	6	Naperville Central High School	96.8	6
GLENBARD WEST HIGH SCHOOL	94.8	7	York Comm High School	96.4	7
Westmont High School	94.8	8	Comm H S Dist 99 - North H S	96	8
GLENBARD SOUTH HIGH SCHOOL	94.6	9	Community High School	95.8	9
Lake Park High School	94.1	10	Naperville North High School	95.7	10
Naperville Central High School	93.1	11	Lisle High School	95.5	11
Community High School	92.7	12	Comm H S Dist 99 - South High Sch	95.4	12
Glenbard North High School	91.9	13	Lake Park High School	94.3	13
York Comm High School	90.9	14	Hinsdale South High School	94.2	14
Wheaton Warrenville South H S	89.8	15	Glenbard North High School	93.9	15
Hinsdale South High School	89.1	16	Willowbrook High School	93.7	16
Comm H S Dist 99 - North H S	88.7	17	GLENBARD SOUTH HIGH SCHOOL	93.3	17
Fenton High School	88.3	18	Addison Trail High School	92.7	18
Glenbard East High School	87.3	19	Westmont High School	91.6	19
Willowbrook High School	85.2	20	GLENBARD WEST HIGH SCHOOL	90.9	20
Addison Trail High School	83.8	21	Glenbard East High School	88.7	21
Comm H S Dist 99 - South High Sch	81.2	22	Fenton High School	87.3	22
State of Illinois	85.2		State of Illinois	85.9	

HOW THE STATE DEFINES GRADUATION RATES

The Illinois State Board of Education defines graduation rates by a formula that takes into consideration the number of high school graduates in a given year and the freshman enrollment four years earlier. Educators say the formula has flaws, including not counting students who finish their requirements in summer school. Districts also differ in how many credits are required to graduate, so it may be easier in one district to accumulate graduation credits than another. The same formula is used across districts and graduation rates are reported annually to the public on Illinois School Report Cards.

Here is the precise formula used, with the 2007 graduation rates as an example:

Graduation rate is the number of 2006-07 high school graduates, divided by the first-time ninth grade 2003 fall enrollment less students transferred out plus students transferred in, multiplied by 100. [Numerator = number of graduates; denominator = (ninth grade enrollment - transfers out) + transfers in]. "Transfers out" include students from the freshman class who transferred to another school or died prior to graduation. "Transfers in" encompass 2006-07 graduates who were not counted in the first-time ninth grade 2003 fall enrollment; they may include students who transferred from another school, students with or without disabilities, and students who graduated in fewer or more than four years.

graduating won't. The senior class across all high schools is about 2,300 students.

However, district officials say, some of those students will fulfill their graduation

requirements during the following summer or even next school year but won't be recorded in the graduation rates for their class.

Educators believe that is

one flaw in the way graduation rates are calculated. The state's formula takes into consideration the number of high school graduates in a given year and the freshman enroll-

ment four years earlier. But some students get left out of the formula based on timing.

Joseph Wargin, chair of the guidance department at Glenbard South, said that of South's 2007 non-graduates, all but one received a diploma by January the following year.

"Yet in our numbers, they're not reflected and they show up as dropouts, as opposed to showing that some of them graduated in August and January and some are in the guided program," Wargin said. "We had a number of students in our guided program, students that didn't graduate because they're disabled and just not ready."

At Glenbard West, Principal Jane Thorsen suggested that students who graduate before the start of the following school year should be reported as graduating with their class.

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SDB7 Graduation Rate	South Graduation Rate	West Graduation Rate	East Graduation Rate	North Graduation Rate
2002 91.7	2002 94.6	2002 94.8	2002 87.3	2002 91.9
2003 92	2003 96.8	2003 95.4	2003 83.7	2003 94.1
2004 91.1	2004 97.4	2004 94.8	2004 83.3	2004 92.8
2005 93.5	2005 96.3	2005 96.4	2005 86.7	2005 95.9
2006 92.8	2006 96.8	2006 97.7	2006 85.9	2006 93.4
2007 91.7	2007 93.3	2007 90.9	2007 88.7	2007 93.9

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"I think some of the system constraints we work under are inherently unfair," said Thorsen. "Nonetheless, we take the numbers very seriously. Those numbers represent our students and we have an obligation to each one of them to help get them through."

West's graduation rate was 94.8 in 2002—in the top third of DuPage County high schools. The graduation rose to 97.7 in 2006, and then dropped to 90.9 in 2007, one of the lowest rates in the county.

Over the decade, West has seen increases in low-income and black and Hispanic students who traditionally score lower on state tests and have lower graduation rates than their white peers. That can pull down the overall graduation rate at a school.

Graduation rates for black and Hispanic students at West were lower in 2007, compared to 2002, but so were rates for white students, the state data show.

"I don't think there's ever a simple explanation," Thorsen said, "especially when you're looking at data that's this complex as what we work with."

At Glenbard South, the graduation rate for white students was the same in 2007 as 2002, and the rate rose for Hispanic students. But black students saw a big drop, from a graduation rate of 100 percent in 2002 to 81.8 percent in 2007.

Overall, South's graduation rate was 93.3, a drop from 94.6 in 2002 and 97.4 in 2004. South's principal, Terri Hanrahan, said despite the recent numbers, she believes the school is graduating more students than what is being reported.

"I have to be concerned because that's what people are going to read; that the graduation rate dropped, but how many people are going to notice when it's at 98 percent," Hanrahan said. "Kids aren't just statistics to us. I look at the graduation rate from last school year and want to say there is no way (that the percent of non-graduates is as high as reported.)"

The decline in graduation rates comes at the same time that West and South have excelled on a key measure of high school achievement—scores on the ACT college entrance exam. Both schools ranked among the top high schools in the state for scores on the ACT for the class of 2007.

The district-wide graduation rate for Glenbard 87 was the same in 2007 as it was in 2002—91.7—because West and South's declines were offset by graduate rate gains at Glenbard East and Glenbard North.

Statewide, the graduate rate increased slightly for all public schools, from 85.2 in 2002 to 85.9 in 2007.

Graduate rates have been the subject of debate nationally, with critics saying they don't represent the real number of students dropping out, and educators saying they don't capture the real number of students graduating.

Pamela Zimmermann, associate superintendent of education services in District 87, said the district is hoping the federal government will follow through in the next year with plans to standardize the definitions each state uses to calculate graduation rates.

"I simply wish that (the graduation rate) would allow us a way to calculate children who eventually finish and graduate from our schools," Zimmermann said. "Some of the kids are simply going to stumble and need some help, but some of the kids you would never expect that four years would be enough to get it done."

THE GRADUATION GAP

Both locally and nationally, schools have struggled to close the achievement gap between white and minority students. At Glenbard West and South, the gap in graduation rates between white and black students has widened in five years, as it has in Glenbard District 87 as a whole, and the state of Illinois. The gap in graduation rates for white and Hispanic students has grown at West, District 87 and Illinois. At Glenbard South, Hispanic students have a higher graduation rate than white students.

The gap between white & black students:

	% black students at school	white student graduation rate	black student graduation rate	gap between white & black students
WEST				
2002	4.7%	95.7	89.5	6.2
2007	5.0%	93.1	81.5	11.6
SOUTH				
2002	4.0%	94	100	-6
2007	7.1%	94	81.8	12.2
DISTRICT 87				
2002	4.4%	92	88.1	3.9
2007	6.7%	94	83.3	10.7
ILLINOIS				
2002	20.8%	89.2	74.5	14.7
2007	19.6%	92.2	73.8	18.4

The gap between white & Hispanic students:

	% Hispanic students at school	white student graduation rate	Hispanic student graduation rate	gap between white and Hispanic students
WEST				
2002	7.5%	95.7	85.2	10.5
2007	11.8%	93.1	80.4	12.7
SOUTH				
2002	4.1%	94	95.5	-1.5
2007	4.5%	94	100	-6
DISTRICT 87				
2002	6.8%	92	87	5
2007	12.4%	94	79.1	14.9
ILLINOIS				
2002	16.2%	89.2	74.7	14.5
2007	19.3%	92.2	73.4	18.8

GRADUATION RATES BY RACE, GENDER, INCOME

The state breaks out graduation rates by race, gender, socioeconomic status, and students with learning disabilities. Across the district, students with disabilities and low income students have seen the biggest declines in graduation rates since 2002.

	overall graduation rate	students with disabilities					low income
		male	female	white	black	Hispanic	
WEST							
2002	94.3	83.7	86.1	90.7	89.5	94.4	93.9
2007	90.9	82.2	83.8	83.1	81.5	80.4	83.1
change	-3.9	-5.5	-2.3	-2.6	-4.8	-3.3	-10.8
SOUTH							
2002	94.6	94.9	94.3	94	100	95.6	96
2007	93.3	95.6	90.9	94	81.8	100	91.4
change	-1.3	0.7	-3.4	0	-18.2	4.5	-6.6
DISTRICT 87							
2002	91.7	92.1	91.2	92	88.1	87	94.6
2007	91.7	90.2	93.3	94	83.3	79.1	93.8
change	0	-1.9	2.1	2	-4.8	-7.9	-0.8
ILLINOIS							
2002	85.2	82.5	87.9	88.2	74.5	74.7	89.1
2007	85.9	83.1	88.7	92.2	73.8	73.4	93.5
change	0.7	0.6	0.8	3	-0.7	-1.3	4.4