

Focusing on the Core

Emphasizing core curriculum key to reducing ACT gaps and improving college retention rates

Year after year, Wisconsin students post one of the highest average ACT composite scores in the nation. This

should mean that most Wisconsin high school students are well prepared for college, right?

Wrong, said two education experts who used their presentation to demonstrate how a detailed analysis of statewide student performance data from the 2011 ACT showed troubling achievement gaps and lack of college readiness in some areas.

“Some of our students are in much better shape than others,” said Galen Johnson, assistant vice president of the ACT’s Midwest Region.

Johnson and Dr. Alan Tuchtenhagen, director of the Center for Leadership Studies at Augsburg College and a school board member in River Falls, gave the presentation.

According to ACT, 71 percent of last year’s Wisconsin high school graduates took the ACT, the most widely used college entrance exam in the country. The average composite score was 22.2, a point higher than the national average.

Wisconsin’s subject scores in English, mathematics, reading and science were also higher than the national averages. However, when compared to ACT’s college readiness benchmarks – the minimum score in each subject needed to indicate a student’s ability to successfully complete a college course in that area

– the story changes. Wisconsin’s subject scores are higher than the benchmarks in English, mathematics



River Falls school board member Alan Tuchtenhagen said standardizing curriculum is essential to strengthening academic rigor.

not. A core curriculum is defined as four years of English and math and three years of science and social studies. Students who take a core curriculum meet or significantly exceed the college benchmark scores in those areas while those who did not take a core curriculum lag far behind.

Getting students to take a core curriculum is key to reducing those gaps and improving college retention rates, Johnson said. High school curriculums should also be aligned to focus on classes students need to succeed in college and in the workplace.

Another important factor is making sure the name of a class reflects the content being taught. “If it says biology, we should be teaching biology not general science,” said Johnson, who called for more rigor in high school courses.

Standardizing the curriculum is key, agreed Tuchtenhagen.

“Curriculum can’t be up to the local districts. We have to have uniform standards,” he said. ■

and reading. But the science score is well below the benchmark score of 24.

In addition, Wisconsin African American students’ composite score of 16.2 compared to a composite of 23.2 for Caucasians, making that achievement gap the largest in the nation. The composite for Hispanic students was 19.2 and the achievement gap there was the third highest in the nation.

Also troubling is the achievement gap between students who took a core curriculum and those who did

Session Details

TITLE *Mind the Gaps — Career and College Readiness Varies Between Groups*

PRESENTER Galen Johnson, assistant vice president for ACT’s Midwest Region; Dr. Alan Tuchtenhagen, director of the Center for Leadership Studies at Augsburg College, River Falls school board member