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24% Fail Rate For Seniors?

By Sigrid Bathen
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Nearly one-fourth of California public high school seniors may not graduate this June because they failed course requirements or state-mandated proficiency tests, a state Department of Education survey indicated Monday.

Black and Hispanic students fared particularly badly, with 43 percent of black seniors in the survey having failed to satisfy school course requirements or proficiency tests — or both.

According to state figures, blacks constitute roughly 10 percent of the more than 316,000 high school seniors. Thirty-four percent of Hispanic students, who account for 23 percent of the 12th-grade population, might not graduate in June, the survey concluded.

By contrast, 18 percent of white students might not graduate — 11 percent because they failed local proficiency tests, 3 percent because they failed to satisfy course requirements, and 4 percent because they failed both. The percentages for Asian students were roughly the same as those of whites.

Among black students included in the sample study — which included more than 80,000 students in 85 districts — 17 percent failed proficiency tests, 8 percent failed course requirements, and 18 percent failed both.

Among Hispanic students, 16 percent failed proficiency tests, 5 percent course requirements and 13 percent both.

Of all students tested, the survey concluded, 76 percent will graduate in June. Of the remainder, half failed proficiency tests, 4 percent failed course requirements and 8 percent failed both.

Four percent of the students surveyed were identified as speaking limited or no English. According to the report, more than half of the limited-English students passed

English-language tests, as did one-third of the non-English speaking students.

State education officials said that accomplishment probably reflected a failure of local districts to reclassify non-English speaking students who later took the tests when their command of the language improved. "Obviously, if they couldn't speak English, they couldn't take the test," one official said.

Under 1976 legislation authored by Assemblyman Gary Hart, D-Santa Barbara, students who graduate from public high schools in June of this year must pass reading, writing and math tests designed by their local school districts.

This year's is the first graduating class to be affected by the legislation, although districts have been aware of the requirement for three years and have been in various stages of readiness to deal with its effects.

At a Capitol press conference to announce the survey results Monday, state schools chief Wilson Riles — who favors proficiency requirements but wants them locally administered — did not express surprise at the large percentages.

Since the figures are based on tests administered in the spring or fall of 1980, he noted there is still time for students who failed proficiency tests to pass makeup exams.

For those who have failed to meet course requirements for graduation, he was not so hopeful.

"There are going to be some unhappy people," Riles said of those students who won't graduate in June. "But the fact of the matter is you can't have it both ways. You can't complain about students who graduate without being able to read and write, and then say, go ahead and graduate them."

Riles said alert school district administrators, teachers and parents have used poor proficiency test scores to upgrade student performance. Riles said poor scores on early proficiency tests in some schools last year prompted teachers and administrators to concentrate on areas in which student performance was low — causing a major turnaround in scores this year.

Riles blamed student absenteeism and parents' lack of interest for poor student proficiency.

"If youngsters are not in school, they obviously cannot meet course requirements," he said. "The schools do not have complete control."

He said some urban school districts have a "100 percent turnover" in their student population between September and June of every school year.

He said efforts by school administrators to contact parents of students

who failed proficiency tests often were unsuccessful, or parents were simply not interested.

"The alert parent — the parent who has kept up — will be concerned and will work at it," Riles said. "But many, many parents simply didn't show up after their youngsters failed at a preliminary level.

"They were notified by the school district, but they just didn't show up.

"Although districts are well aware of the importance of parental support, efforts to get parents interested and involved in the proficiency requirements of their high school-age children have produced discouraging results," the report concluded.

"With few exceptions, districts reported little success in getting parents to attend scheduled proficiency conferences. (Some) districts spent enormous amounts of time and effort to do so, often dispatching school staff to conduct in-home conferences."

And, the report concluded, students are strongly influenced by their parents' attitudes toward education.
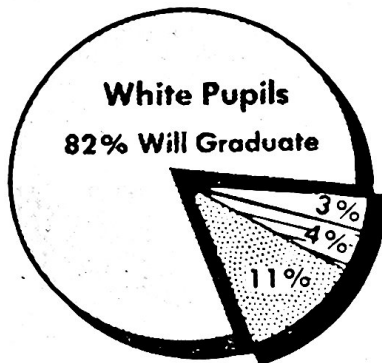
"The student's family background emerged as one of the most critical factors affecting motivation," the report said, "since children tend to reflect their parents' attitudes toward school."

Other reasons for poor performance, according to the report, are frequent moves and lack of motivation. "The same groups of students continue to be plagued by the same pervasive problems — problems that may be only marginally under a district's or a school's control.
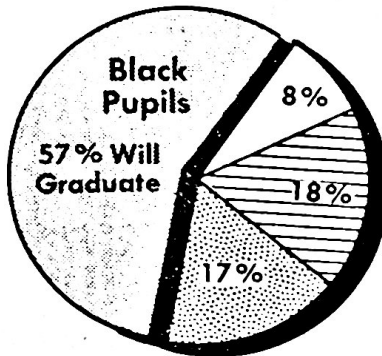
When area school officials were asked in the survey how students could best meet proficiency standards, they said students would pass the tests if they "would only come to school and attend to their classes."
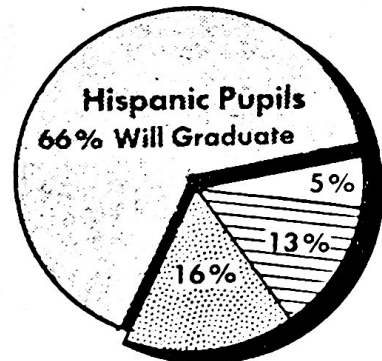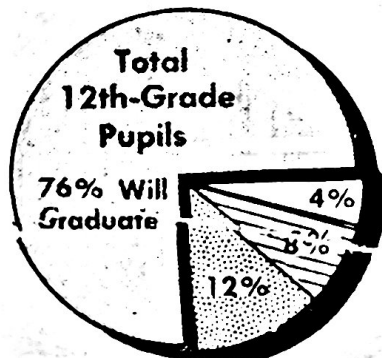
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Proficiency

White Pupils
82% Will Graduate

3%
4%
11%

18% May Not Graduate

Black Pupils
57% Will Graduate

8%
18%
17%

43% May Not Graduate

Hispanic Pupils
66% Will Graduate

5%
13%
16%

34% May Not Graduate

Total 12th-Grade Pupils
76% Will Graduate

4%
8%
12%

24% May Not Graduate

Will Graduate
☐ Meet course requirements and pass proficiency tests

May Fail To Graduate
▨ Fail course requirements and proficiency tests

☐ Fail course requirements only

▨ Fail proficiency test(s) only