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## EDUCATION

# Argus Leader investigation: Wide disparity in how high schools prepare college-bound students

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### Story Highlights

Between 2010 and 2017, nearly a third of graduates enrolling in one of South Dakota's six public universities required remedial classes in reading, math or both.

Some school districts have devised methods to address student preparedness, with varying degrees of success.

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Fewer than 30 miles separate Brandon Valley High School from both Tri-Valley High School and Tea Area High School.

While close in proximity, they are on opposite ends of a key metric of academic success.

Graduates from Brandon Valley who entered the South Dakota university system were among the least likely to need remedial classes in reading and algebra. Graduates of Tri-Valley and Tea were among high schools whose graduating classes exceeded the statewide average for those needing remedial classes – by a wide margin.

Those findings are from an Argus Leader analysis of eight years of graduation data collected by the South Dakota Board of Regents.

Overall, between 2010 and 2017, nearly a third of graduates enrolling in one of the South Dakota's six public universities required remedial classes in reading, math or both. The numbers suggest that some high schools are struggling to prepare a significant number of students for college.

Statewide, the number of graduates who required remedial classes fluctuated over the eight-year period, getting close to a low of 28 percent until jumping back to nearly 33 percent in 2017, the latest graduation year that data are available.

The data have limitations: They only measure students who enrolled in South Dakota's public university system. The data doesn't include graduates who enrolled elsewhere or who didn't go to college.

"Your data is showing what 20 to 30 percent of a graduating class is doing," said Tea Area Superintendent Jennifer Lowery. "We have a high number of students who are not choosing the regental system for their postsecondary education."

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But interviews with education officials also reveal that some school districts have devised methods that consistently help their graduates outperform the statewide average when it comes to remedial education.

Mary Stadick Smith, a spokeswoman for the South Dakota Department of Education, said individual districts have latitude when it comes to implementing policies and cultures that address student preparedness. Some, she said, do a better job than others.

## A perennial problem

It's not a new issue. In his final term as governor (1998-2003), Bill Janklow clashed with public schools over their budget requests. Janklow criticized the education lobby for wanting more money each year while failing to address achievement measures, including graduates who needed remedial education.

In his opening days as Janklow's successor, former Gov. Mike Rounds echoed Janklow, warning the state's K-12 system that it wasn't preparing enough students for college.

That same year, in 2003, former University of South Dakota President Jim Abbott warned lawmakers that a third of incoming high school graduates needed remedial English or math classes.

Despite the warnings and the passage of time, the number has remained stubbornly unchanged.

## A possible solution

The Department of Education launched a program called College Readiness Coursework to help school districts. High school juniors who score within certain benchmarks on the ACT

receive a letter from the department inviting them to participate in the program, which is run online by Northern State University.

The goal of the program is to identify students who might be lagging and get them ready for college-level work. The courses are available in English, reading and math and vary from 10 weeks to 12 months.

But they come at a cost, ranging from \$125 to \$175. In some cases, school districts have chosen to subsidize that cost for their students, Stadick Smith said. But in other cases, the students and their families bear the cost.

Even though the money is reimbursed if a student successfully passes the class, response to the program has been underwhelming. In the 2015-2016 school year, just 100 students participated, and of those, only 51 passed. In contrast, 1,167 students from the 2016 class who went to a public university in the state needed a remedial course.

## **Starting college in the hole**

The stakes are high for students who enter college needing remedial classes. Students don't get credit for those classes, which means they are spending valuable time taking classes that won't help them graduate. And unlike credit-bearing classes, they aren't subsidized by the state, so they are more expensive.

Among high school graduates who entered the university system in 2012, just 23 percent of those who needed remedial classes earned a bachelor's degree within four years compared to 43 percent who didn't take a remedial course, said Jay Perry, the interim vice president for academic affairs.

Among those who took six years to earn a degree, 62 percent of the students who did not need remedial classes were successful, while only 38 percent who took a remedial class succeeded.

"We don't want students in remedial classes," Perry said.

"Quite frankly," he added, "it keeps me up at night."

Research into the issue shows there are steps high schools can take to reduce their ranks of graduates who need remedial classes. They can offer ACT prep classes and take advantage of the Department of Education's College Readiness Coursework program, Perry said. And they

can encourage students to take four years of math in high school. Or, even if they aren't going to take a full four years, to encourage students to take math their senior year.

"Don't take your senior year off," Perry said.

## Best practices

The majority of students who need remedial instruction need it in math, which gets them ready to tackle college algebra. Officials in districts with low numbers of students who need remedial classes say they emphasize math.

"We do have a significant percentage of our students take four years of math, and this certainly has helped them to meet the entrance requirement for math," Brandon Valley Principal Gregg Talcott said in an email. "We have tried to help students to register for the most appropriate senior English class and make sure that those classes meet the needs of those students relative to their plans for their time after high school."

Brandon Valley also offers an ACT prep course. Over the last eight years, the number of graduates needing a remedial course averaged below 19 percent.

Among high schools who sent at least 10 graduates a year to the state university system, Elk Point-Jefferson High School had the lowest average number of graduates who needed remedial education. Superintendent Derrick Barrios credits a strong culture among teachers and administrators who established a challenging curriculum that encourages achievement. A high school counselor is also proactive at spotting students who might be struggling and getting them extra help, and the district offers an ACT prep class.

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The district's math requirements exceed the state's minimum standards, and the district offers a math class that mirrors college algebra, which all students are required to take.

"They're going through a year of college algebra before they even go to college," Barrios said.

"The state sets standards," he added, "but local school districts have the ability to determine how they want to meet those standards."

Parkston Superintendent Shayne McIntosh wasn't aware the Board of Regents tracked the need for remedial classes by high school, but he was pleasantly surprised to see how well his students were doing, whose graduates were 9 percentage points below the statewide average.

There's no silver bullet to ensuring college readiness, he said, but he sees a few reasons why students in Parkston might be better prepared than others. For one, Parkston encourages students to take the ACT regardless of whether they plan to attend college, and students consistently surpass the state average score. The high school also encourages juniors and seniors to take math classes so that it's fresh when they graduate.

## Taking action

In Tri-Valley, which had one of the highest rates of graduates needing remedial classes, Superintendent Mike Lodmel said the district is taking action. Lodmel said he was concerned by how many graduates needed remedial classes, particularly in math. Tri-Valley students were also scoring below the state average in math on the ACT, and Lodmel wanted to figure out the root cause.

One thing that stood out was the number of students who weren't taking advanced math courses. Instead, students were getting a head start on math as eighth graders and finishing graduation requirements by their sophomore years.

"We found in many cases students were not taking math courses beyond Algebra II, which was the exact opposite of our intentions (with eighth-grade Algebra)," Lodmel said.

Now, Tri-Valley is going to require students to take a minimum of three math courses in high school, which Lodmel hopes will make more of them ready for college. The district is also adding an elective ACT prep course, an advanced writing course and more reading courses to hopefully lessen the need for remedial classes.

Chamberlain High School led the state in the percentage of graduates who needed remedial classes in the Argus Leader analysis, but the district has made progress by reducing that rate over the last few years. **In 2011, 64 percent of graduates needed remedial classes. That number was below 36 percent in 2017 and below 28 percent in 2016.**

"We encourage our students to have math class every year," Superintendent Deb Johnson said. "Of course, some of them look at the requirements, and if they fulfill their math requirement, they take something else."

But data also show gaps in math proficiency even before students hit their senior year, Johnson added. And the district is moving to address those gaps. Next year, the Chamberlain School District is joining more than two dozen other districts that are participating in the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, a state program that helps districts with training and

support to ensure their students are ready for life after high school graduation, including college.

“We have decided, for us, it’s time to enter into the program,” Johnson said.

## **The best and the worst**

The Argus Leader analysis looked only at schools who had at least 10 graduates attend a South Dakota Board of Regents institution. The data below show the average percentage of students from 2010 to 2017 who went on to a state university and needed remedial math, English or both.

### **Top 5:**

Elk Point-Jefferson High School: 16.91 percent  
Brandon Valley High School: 18.69 percent  
Sioux Falls O’Gorman High School: 19.5 percent  
Parkston High School: 20.57 percent  
Groton Area High School: 21.33 percent

### **Bottom 5:**

Sioux Falls New Technology High School: 46.91 percent\*  
Chamberlain High School: 41.61 percent  
Tri-Valley High School: 40.88 percent  
Tea Area High School: 40.84 percent  
Belle Fourche High School: 40.13 percent

\*Data for New Technology High School was only available from 2014 to 2017.