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Inside ExploreLI

TOP STORIES

LI GRADUATION RATES DIP

88.4% of seniors, down 0.5% from '17, finished on time

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND

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Long Island's public high schools still rank well above the state average in terms of graduation rates, but other regions of the state appear to be narrowing the gap.

Student achievement figures for the Class of 2018, released Wednesday by the state education department, show 88.4 percent of seniors in Nassau and Suffolk counties graduated on time after four years of high school, down slightly from 88.9 percent in 2017.

Meanwhile, statewide averages rose a bit, to 80.4 percent in 2018 compared with 80.2 percent in 2017.

Statistically, that's an eight-point spread between the Island's higher average and the lower statewide figure. Six or seven years ago, the spread would have been more like 13 or 14 points, but school systems — including New York City's — since have moved up.

Education analysts have pointed out that this is not so unusual and that when a region such as Nassau-Suffolk reaches a relatively strong level of achievement, the tendency is to plateau. Still, the thought that the area's schools might be losing a bit of their edge has left some observers a little uneasy.

"Long Island's property values are directly tied to the high quality of public education within our region," said Kyle Strober, executive director of the Association for a Better Long Island, an advocacy group that describes itself as the region's largest real-estate trade organization. "Any news that might diminish our excellent education system may encourage young families looking to buy a house to look elsewhere — for example, Westchester County or northern New Jersey."

The association has pushed school districts to reduce cash reserves that exceed legal limits, as a means of curbing taxation.

Area school leaders noted, on the other hand, that there are



ANTHONY LANZILOTE

The statewide average for graduation rates rose a bit in 2018.

areas in which many Island high schools clearly excel — for example, in the cultivation of student prizewinners in national science competitions.

"I don't think you can reach a conclusion based solely on graduation rates," said Michael Nagler, superintendent of Mineola schools and president of the Nassau County Council of School Superintendents.

Nagler added that the region, including his own 2,800-student system, has experienced an upsurge in students with limited English skills and that this can affect four-year graduation rates, in part because such students may require a fifth year of schooling to hone their language skills and graduate. Mineola recently has expanded its bilingual classes and found that scores in subjects such as math improved markedly when students were tested in their own language, the superintendent said.

"That's just a factor of them not knowing English when they enroll in ninth grade," Nagler said. "It says nothing about their aptitude."

New York State's graduation rates are based on percentages of

teens graduating either with Regents diplomas, which reflect completion of some coursework written at a college-prep level, or local diplomas, which require less rigor.

In Albany, education officials said Wednesday that statewide achievement gaps between different groups of students, while substantial, were lessening.

Over the past four years, black students, with a graduation rate of 70.1 percent statewide in 2018, narrowed the percentage gap with whites by 4.7 points. Hispanics, with a graduation rate of 69.2 percent, lessened the gap by 3.8 points. Whites remained virtually stationary, with a graduation rate of 88.9 percent.

State education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia, in a teleconference with reporters, described the 2018 results as reflecting a "steady upward trend."

The state in recent years has expanded opportunities for students to graduate, for example, by allowing local school superintendents to determine if students with disabilities qualify for diplomas on the basis of their academic proficiency, even if this was not demonstrated in

their test scores alone.

On the Island, the continuing gap is dramatically underlined by differences among districts in numbers of students earning Regents diplomas with advanced designation.

Highest-achieving districts — for example, East Williston, Garden City and Rockville Centre — presented more than 90 percent of their graduates with advanced diplomas in 2018. Lowest-achieving districts — Hempstead, Roosevelt, Wyandanch — did the same for less than 12 percent of their students.

"There are two education systems in this state — one for the rich and one for the poor," said Lamont Johnson, president of Hempstead's school board.

Johnson said the number of Hempstead students taking advanced courses is increasing and called upon the state to provide more financial assistance for his district and others like it that rank low in taxable income and property wealth.

For the region as a whole, the trend in distribution of advanced diplomas was positive.

A total 53.4 percent of graduating seniors on the Island earned advanced diplomas in 2018 — up from 52.2 percent in 2017.

In the Malverne school district, which is racially and ethnically diverse, Superintendent James Hunderfund takes satisfaction in the 58 percent advanced-diploma rate recorded at his high school.

"Kids have really shifted to a hard-work ethic," said Hunderfund, who has served 12 years as Malverne's schools chief. "Ten years ago, I might not have said that. But now, you've got more kids applying for early admission to college, carrying backpacks heavy with books or computers or whatever. That's pretty much the standard now. It used to be shunned."

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