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Rockford School District students far behind in pursuing college

By Cathy Bayer
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ROCKFORD — Less than half of the Rockford School District's 2010 graduates enrolled in college last fall, a rate that's 21 points lower than the national average.

Just 49 percent signed up for a two-year or four-year college, compared with 70 percent nationally, according to the National Student Clearinghouse.

Increasing the number of adults with bachelor's degrees is a strategy that the Rock River Valley's political and business leaders have long pointed to for luring higher-paying jobs to the area and boosting wealth. Just 20.5 percent of adults 25 and older in Winnebago County had a bachelor's degree or better in 2009, according to estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau. The average is 29.8 percent in Illinois and 27.5 percent nationally.

District officials only began tracking college enrollment of its high school graduates in the 2009-10 school year and don't know the reasons behind the disparity.

"Right now, we have a picture of one year," said Travis Woulfe, the district's executive director of accountability.

His office will work this summer to upload data from the 2011 school year and plug in data from 2009 and 2008, too. Examining the broader data could shed light on other questions, including why last year's high school graduation rate jumped nine points to nearly 80 percent, he said.

"What's accounted for those bumps and drops?" Woulfe said. "We need to delve deeper."

The School District more than makes the grade when two-year college enrollment is examined. District seniors who graduated in 2010 exceed the national average of college enrollment for two-year colleges — 30 percent locally, compared with 28 percent nationally. But they're 23 points lower than the national average when it comes to enrollment in four-year colleges — 19 percent locally versus 42 percent nationally.

It's important to push college — especially a four-year degree — because students who go on to earn bachelor's degrees will make more money in their lives and have a lower unemployment rate, Woulfe said.

Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics support his point. In 2009, the median income for a person with just a high school degree was \$32,552. For someone with an associate degree, it increased to \$39,884, while for a person with a bachelor's degree it was \$53,976. The median unemployment rate for people with a bachelor's degree in 2009 was 5.4 percent versus 10.3 percent for those with just a high school diploma.

The message he has for parents: "If you want your kid to stay gainfully employed, encourage education."

Data from the National Student Clearinghouse also provide a picture of students' college aspirations. The district surveyed students during the spring of their junior year about their plans after high school. In that

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survey, 74.2 percent of students said they planned to attend a two-year or four-year college, while just 49 percent actually enrolled in such programs.

Woulfe said fewer than half of district students complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid through the federal student aid office of the U.S. Department of Education. The office ensures all eligible individuals can benefit from federal financial assistance for continuing education.

Woulfe said that perhaps students plan to attend college in their junior year, then by the time they're seniors they realize how expensive college can be.

"If that's the primary concern, we can influence that greatly," Woulfe said.

The district can offer more college help workshops and push high school counselors to further engage students about their plans after high school, he said.

It's important to push students toward higher education, because it's increasingly difficult to find a job without at least a high school diploma or equivalent, said School Board member Ronnell Moore, who works for Rock River Training Corp.

"More young people are realizing that it's important to not only have a high school diploma, but you need to go farther," she said. "You need something on top of a high school diploma."