

Colorado missing the bus on post-secondary plans

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An innovative program at Denver's Lincoln High School aims to keep at-risk students in school by offering them a shot at earning not only a high school diploma but a two-year associate's degree or a career certificate. It drew national attention big-time recently, with an eight-page spread in the special "School and College" report published by The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Writer Ben Gose even explained the "Colorado paradox" to Chronicle readers - the fact that compared with other states, Colorado has one of the best-educated populations because so many people move here for high-tech jobs, but also one of the worst records in educating its own residents, with low rates of high school graduation and college attendance.

The program College Now, developed by then-principal Scott Mendelsberg in 2004, his first year at Lincoln, seems to be having the desired effect. In 2004, Gose writes, 17 percent of graduating seniors continued their education; in 2005, 73 percent did.

So naturally the state Department of Education is trying to shut it down.

State law says that a student is entitled to funds for public education until high school graduation or age 21, whichever is first. College Now established a "differentiated diploma," with graduation requirements equivalent to those for a two-year college degree. Students who opt for that diploma can stay in school until they meet those requirements.

Colorado Commissioner of Education William Moloney says that's contrary to a state Board of Education rule that says students can't get funds for a fifth year of high school once they have enough credits to graduate. "Every senior in the state called up wanting a free year of college tuition," he told the Chronicle, hyperbolically.

It's not absolutely clear that the state rule applies exactly to College Now's plan, which was crafted with the intention that it would not. And another small district has been running a "fifth year" program for a number of years, sort of under the radar.

But the more interesting point is why there is such a rule at all. In June 2001, a performance audit of the state's various post-secondary options noted that fifth-year programs have both costs and benefits, and recommended that they be evaluated. Instead, in August the department and the Colorado Commission on Higher Education sent out a memo telling schools and districts the programs were not allowed. According to a press release issued by Jared Polis, who is vice-chairman of the state board, it wasn't until 17 months later that the board actually adopted the rule, "based on an inaccurate interpretation of the auditor's report."

Moloney is still clinging to that "inaccurate interpretation," to the detriment of students' best interests. State Rep. Fran Coleman, D-Denver, who was chair of the Legislative Audit Committee when the audit was done, says it was never the intention of the committee to prohibit fifth-year programs. In fact, she has a bill in the legislature now that would set up a limited program for up to 500 at-risk students, but worries about its cost may doom it.

That's just bone-headed. The state pays, without complaint, for five or six years of high school for students who end up dropping out; if some of them could be motivated to stay and work hard by the prospect of a college degree at the end, wouldn't that be a better deal for the state? The state board could simply repeal its rule, or if it is really worried about "every senior in the state," limit eligibility to low-income or at-risk students.

And the sad thing is, post-secondary programs elsewhere have been hugely beneficial. A recent report from the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota looked at Minnesota's experience over 20 years. More than 110,000 students have participated, and in a sample survey 86 percent said they'd make the same choice again.

Participation in Minnesota's "College in the Schools" has increased 10-fold since 1991-1992, to more than 14,000 students in 2004-2005. That's good even for those who aren't in the program, because teachers gain a clearer idea of what their students will need to know and to be able to do when they get to college. The biggest problem identified by the Chronicle's "School and College" report is the huge disconnect between what high school teachers think of their students' preparation for college and what college faculty think.

In surveys, "faculty members say that students are inadequate writers, have trouble understanding difficult materials, fall short in knowledge of science and math, have poor study habits, and lack motivation." Four percent of professors, but 37 percent of teachers, say students are well prepared in math.

Colorado is missing out on potential gains, and it's pretty clear that Moloney is the one at fault. The state doesn't need a new law; it just needs a new rule from the board of education.

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