

D-99 boasts higher ACT scores, AP and honors enrollment

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DOWNERS GROVE - Downers Grove School District 99 students are scoring better on the ACT and taking more honors and Advanced Placement classes than in years past, according to the district board of education.

The board heard several presentations Oct. 3 regarding the academic performance of Downers Grove North and South students during its regularly scheduled board meeting.

Gina Ziccardi, assistant superintendent for student learning, said the district's students continue to outperform both state and national ACT averages, often increasing their ACT EXPLORE test, which is taken by eighth-graders as an early metric test, by more than six points.

"I think that speaks to District 99 and honestly probably speaks to our feeder districts," she said.

The average composite ACT scores for the Class of 2016 was 23.9, up from 22.6 the year before and the highest since 2011, when students averaged a score of 23.3.

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Downers Grove North outperformed its sister school in the year, with an average composite of 23.9 against 22.9 at South, although district staff noted both have consistently trended upward in recent years and both schools share new strategies and approaches.

"It's hard for one school to catch another school because success begets success," Superintendent Henry Thiele said. "Changes that you make now this year, you're not going to see the outcomes of that for several years down the road."

Both the state and national average ACT score is 20.8, slightly down for the nation's 21 in 2015 and up for the state's 20.7.

There also was good news on the AP and honors course participation, with 48 percent of all 2015-16 graduat-

ing District 99 students completing at least one such course during their academic career. Nearly 38 percent of the 2016 graduating class completed an AP course.

"It's been our mission for several years now to increase enrollment in our highest and most rigorous courses," Ziccardi said.

The 2015-16 school year also saw a jump of more than 300 additional AP tests taken throughout the district, from 1,729 to 2,047, and more than 200 additional scores of 3, 4 or 5.

More than 80 percent of all students who took an AP test received one of those scores, down from 82.3 the previous year and 86.8 in 2011-12 but still well above state recommendations of 70 percent - and understandable with the increase of test takers, Ziccardi said.

The sharp increase has presented a challenge for scheduling, she said, but it was a welcome one.

"It creates building problems," she

said. "We're thrilled with that and we're working on some potential solutions for that, but that's incredible to have 318 more tests."

Ziccardi clarified that there is no shortage of instructors qualified to teach honors or AP coursework. She hopes to create additional opportunities for interested and capable students to prepare for AP coursework, including a summer program currently implemented to get sophomore chemistry students ready for AP chemistry.

Thiele said it's important to get students involved in higher-level classes if possible, as learning study habits and strategies in one class transfers to all their academic pursuits.

"Success breeds success," he said. "We know from research that if you stretch a kid diagonally and you move them anywhere that they can at the next level, once they're successful at that higher level of rigor they're always successful at that higher level of rigor."

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