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State: Graduation rates rise in 15 county high schools; Moorestown highest

By Kelly Kultys, staff writer 23 hrs ago



Members of the Moorestown High School Class of 2016 picked up their diplomas Wednesday night on the football field.

The high school graduation rate across New Jersey increased from 89.7 percent in 2015 to 90.1 percent in 2016, a trend that many Burlington County high schools saw as well.

The New Jersey Department of Education released its graduation rates Thursday morning, citing the fifth straight year that the statewide number increased.

In Burlington County, 15 schools reported increased graduation rates, while the rates decreased in five.

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Burlington City High School saw the highest increase from year to year, from 78.47 percent in 2015 to 86.71 percent in 2016, a jump of 8.24 percent.

Superintendent Patricia Doloughty credited steps the district took to improve student performance in ninth and 10 grades as the main reason.

"Students who repeated in ninth and/or 10th grade — that was an indicator of being at-risk for graduation," Doloughty said.

About two years ago, the district did a data analysis of the students who did not graduate that year and attempted to find trends, she said.

They noticed that students who either repeated ninth or 10 grade or failed a course were at risk for not being on track to graduate.

"Those students who were successful in ninth and 10th grade, the majority of them were successful in going straight through to graduation," she said.

Willingboro, which still has the lowest graduation rate in the county, continued its improvement, rising from 77.78 percent in 2015 to 78.9 in 2016. The high school has improved over 16 percent since 2012, when its graduation rate was 62.83 percent.

Superintendent Ronald Taylor said the district has taken several steps to improve the graduation rate, including tracking factors that could make a student at risk for not being able to graduate, such as attendance or behavioral problems; establishing block scheduling for middle and high school students; developing an alternative program for students, and investing in technology.

"The exceptional school administrative team and counselors have worked hand in hand with our teaching staff and parent partners to raise the bar for our youngsters and increase expectations for everyone," Taylor said in an email.

Taylor said success at the high school not only helps the current students, but also those in lower grades and the community as a whole.

"The success of our secondary schools helps our community to have confidence in our district and makes our township more attractive to young families looking to relocate," he said.

The district is continuing to look to improve its scores for the next year, Taylor said, through improving teaching in the classroom and the curriculum. He also said partnerships with other higher education schools and businesses can be important for success.

"We are working behind the scenes on developing some very exciting partnerships that we hope to bring forward for the 2017-18 school year," he said.

Other high schools that saw increases were: Bordentown Regional, Burlington County Institute of Technology-Westampton, Burlington Township, Cinnaminson, Delran, Florence, Lenape, Moorestown, Northern Burlington County Regional, Palmyra, Rancocas Valley Regional, Seneca and Shawnee.

Moorestown has the highest graduation rate in the county, with 98.44 percent, followed by BCIT-Westampton (98.32), Shawnee (97.73) and Seneca (97.25). Both Shawnee and Seneca are part of the Lenape Regional High School District, which also includes Cherokee and Lenape. The district as a whole saw its rate from the four schools rise from 95.49 percent in 2015 to 96.24 percent in 2016.

Rates decreased at BCIT-Medford, Cherokee, Maple Shade, Pemberton Township and Riverside.

The decreases at Maple Shade and Cherokee were very slim. Maple Shade fell from 91.73 in 2015 to 91.72 in 2016, and Cherokee from 96.42 to 96.11.

Pemberton Township's graduation rate decreased 3.58 percent, from 89.72 to 86.14.

Riverside saw the largest decrease in graduation rate for the second year in a row, dropping 4.51 percent, from 85.16 to 80.65. The school has dropped 8.41 percent since 2014, when its rate was 89.06.

The figures represent the sixth year of the state using the federally mandated methodology for calculating the graduation rate, called the four-year adjusted cohort. The method tracks the number of students who began their freshman year at the school and compares it with the number of graduating seniors, with adjustments for transfers and deaths during the four-year span.

Prior to 2011 in New Jersey, schools calculated their graduation rates through dividing the number of graduates receiving diplomas by the total number of seniors who were enrolled at the start of the year, plus the number of dropouts in the class during each of the four previous years.

Since that year, the state has increased its rate by 7.1 percent, from 83 percent in 2011 to 90.1 percent reported this year.

"We commend the efforts of our students and educators in achieving this tremendous accomplishment and remain committed to keeping New Jersey as a national leader in education by continuing to implement graduation standards that more honestly demonstrate a graduate's preparedness for college, career and community experiences beyond high school," acting state Education Commissioner Kimberley Harrington said in a statement Thursday.

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