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“Grade 13”: Many Florida grads not ready for college

By Anitere Flores

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This fall, many of Florida’s recent high-school graduates are discovering they aren’t quite ready for university-level courses.

Statewide, more than half of high-school graduates entering the Florida college system require remediation, according to the Florida Department of Education.

In essence, thousands of students who received their high-school diplomas last spring have found themselves in “Grade 13.” These young adults, so focused on the future upon arriving at college, are reliving the past.

By all accounts, there is a tremendous gap between what students are learning in high school and the knowledge they actually need to succeed at a university or in the workplace. Statistically, our community’s large minority population has an even greater risk for leaving high school without the education that colleges and jobs demand.

Helping students prepare for college and careers has become a focal point of education reform. U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has called for states to ensure “students exiting one level are prepared for success, without remediation, in the next.”

In Florida, we’re listening and doing something to fulfill that obligation.

Research from ACT shows that high schoolers who follow a path of study that includes rigorous, advanced math and science double their rate of college readiness. This school year, new statewide high-school graduation requirements include math and science courses like biology, advanced algebra, chemistry and physics, and at least one online class. Students also must pass end-of-course exams that eventually will replace the math and science FCATs.

Our purpose is to make high school matter, so students are ready for college and work without remediation.

It’s an open secret that as our economy becomes increasingly technology driven, an ill-prepared high school graduate is woefully disadvantaged.

During the next decade, nearly nine out of 10 jobs in Florida will require education beyond a high-school diploma. Yet of every 100 students in our state, just 76 will graduate from high school, 51 will attend college, and only 32 will earn a bachelor's degree within six years, according to a report from The Florida Council of 100 and the Florida Chamber of Commerce.

Simply put, Florida faces a projected talent gap that most certainly will endanger our place in the global economy. Without an educated work force, jobs will go elsewhere.

We must urgently do a better job of preparing our children for their futures.

As a state representative and a member of the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees the National Assessment of Educational Progress — also known as The Nation's Report Card — I have joined the charge to address our nation's 12th grade preparedness gap. We have to determine the critical link between the high-school academic experience and preparation for postsecondary education and training.

On Nov. 18, the Governing Board released The Nation's Report Card: Grade 12 Reading and Mathematics 2009, the only source of nationally representative data on 12th grade student academic achievement. That makes NAEP uniquely positioned to serve as a national indicator of student academic preparedness for college and job training. Remarkably, no such indicator currently exists.

To address the gap, the independent, bipartisan Governing Board is conducting 17 studies designed to determine how NAEP performance aligns with the skills and knowledge students need for placement in higher education and job training without remediation.

As part of this effort, the board established the NAEP 12th Grade Preparedness Commission to communicate the research results to the public, policymakers, educators, and employers. Ultimately, our aim is to help ensure that today's students are ready for the real world of higher education or the office, laboratory, or factory, and that they can meet the real-world demands of the 21st century without ever having to enroll in "Grade 13."

Anitere Flores is Republican State Sen.-elect from District 38 in Miami-Dade County.