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Report Highlights Progress, Inequity, and First-Generation College Students

By Andrew Trotter
Washington

With its release an annual rite of spring, the latest "Condition of Education" report by the National Center for Education Statistics presents a thick data tapestry of America's educational system, one into which many patterns can be read.

To Secretary of Education Rod Paige, who spoke to a small audience of reporters and staff members at the Department of Education's offices here, the report's 59 indicators on enrollment, outcomes, context, and support for education bolster the education proposals of the Bush administration.

To Andrew Porter, the president of the American Educational Research Association, the data's message is that American education remains riddled with racial and economic inequality.

In fact, the data interweave plenty of pluses and minuses, said Gary W. Phillips, the acting commissioner of the NCES, the data-gathering arm of the Education Department.

For example, test scores show that between 1971 and 1999, 9- and 13-year-old students in the nation's public schools improved

their performance in reading. On the other hand, 17-year-olds showed few meaningful gains in reading over the same period.

In mathematics, between 1973 and 1999, 9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds all improved their performance. But gains in science scores in the '80s and the early '90s, which reversed a decline in the '70s, have stalled, Mr. Phillips said.

Mr. Phillips also highlighted another disappointment revealed by the statistics: the performance of American students in math and science as compared that of students in other leading industrialized countries.

In 1995, U.S. 4th graders tested in math matched the average for the international group. But by 1999, when the students were in 8th grade, they scored below the international average, the report notes. The pattern was similar in science: Students in 4th grade who were tested in 1995 scored higher than the average for the international students, but by 1999, as 8th graders, the U.S. students posted average scores.

Mr. Phillips cited survey data suggesting one probable cause: The other countries, notably Japan and Germany, have better-

trained math and science teachers, who hold college degrees in the subjects that they teach, rather than degrees in education, as is more typical in the United States.

First-Generation Focus

The 310-page report features a special essay each year. For 2001,

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Gary W. Phillips

Acting Commissioner, National Center for Education Statistics

it focuses on the college experience of students who are the first generation in their families to attend college. Mr. Phillips' introduction to the report also discusses first-generation college students.

"Recent NCES studies have shown that high school graduates whose parents did not attend college remain at a disadvantage with respect to postsecondary access even after taking into account

other important factors, such as educational expectations, academic preparation, support from parents and schools, and family income," he writes.

The report notes that first-generation college students are at a distinct disadvantage at fulfilling the various college-admission requirements. Mr. Phillips said that students with college-educated

parents have an edge in finding the motivation to go to college, completing the needed academic preparation and testing, and actually applying to postsecondary institutions.

But taking advanced courses in high school greatly increases the likelihood that first-generation students will enroll in college. Among those who do pursue postsecondary education, 55 percent of

those that had taken regular academic core courses in high school remained in college after three years. But that percentage leaped to 81 percent for those who had taken a more rigorous course load.

"A rough curriculum makes a big difference in student performance for rich kids and poor kids alike," Secretary Paige said.

Mr. Paige said the report represents a cautionary record on the federal role in education, showing that most of the progress made in reading and math came in the 1970s, with little improvement posted since 1980.

The lack of progress in the 1980s and 1990s was striking, Mr. Paige argued, considering that the federal government's role in education has expanded and that the bulk of all federal dollars flowing into the education system was spent in the 1990s.

Mr. Porter of the AERA said a "large and persistent inequality" permeates all aspects of U.S. education. "The gaps are persistent," he said, "and they are large"

FOLLOW-UP: Copies of the report, "The Condition of Education 2001" are available online at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2001072>. Copies also can be obtained by calling, toll free, (877) 433-7827