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Enrollments Are Up in High School Math & Science Courses, But Many Missouri Students Are Not Well-Prepared for College (Says ACT)

Statewide test scores released by ACT in August suggest many Missouri students now entering college may have trouble keeping up in math and science.

According to college-readiness benchmarks, less than one-half (42%) of graduates who took the ACT this year are ready for college algebra and less than one-third (31%) are ready for college biology. (Indicators for English and social science are better at 73% and 54%, respectively.)

Low achievement in math and science are worrisome for Missouri employers who are looking for math- and science-ready graduates. The result could be shortages -- some severe -- for math and science careers, such as engineering, education, computer sciences and health care. For example, only 34 percent of Missouri students interested in education — our future teachers — are prepared for college math, and only 24 percent of them are prepared for college science. The numbers are even worse among those interested in health care, of whom only 23 percent are ready for college math and only 16 percent are ready for college science.

Despite stalled ACT scores, there is evidence that Missouri schools and students are getting more serious about math and science. Statistics from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education show that in the last three years, both the number of school districts offering advanced math and science courses and the number of students taking them have climbed. For example, the number of Missouri students taking Algebra 3 has increased more than 40 percent in the last three years. One reason is more rigorous graduation requirements, which have increased the units of math and science needed for students graduating in 2010 and beyond.

New research from the Missouri Economic Research and Information Center, or MERIC, offers high school students a great incentive for going beyond minimum requirements. The data shows that 21.5 percent of all current Missouri jobs require higher levels of high school math, and that the average annual wage for these jobs is \$68,000, compared to \$37,000 for all occupations across the state. Science jobs pay even better, with an average wage of \$76,000.

Meanwhile, several initiatives across the state are working to get kids fired up — not just signed up — for math and science through innovative, often hands-on projects and curricula.

“Nothing less than the economic success of Missouri and the United States depends on our students achieving more in math and science,” said Rod Nunn, director of Education and Workforce Innovation, Office of Gov. Matt Blunt. “But we want students choosing these careers because they are excited about them. We owe it to our students to show them how rewarding careers in math and science can be.”

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The Missouri Connections Public Outreach Partnership workgroup represents a collaboration of state agencies concerned with education and workforce development who are helping inform and build awareness among the public, particularly students and potential students, of targeted careers, educational and industry trends, and workforce development priorities. Workgroup members represent the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; Department of Higher Education; Department of Economic Development, Division of Workforce Development and Missouri Economic Research & Information Center; Missouri Center for Career Education; and Missouri Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Freelance writer is Anita Harrison.

Missouri Connections News Room, http://www.dese.mo.gov/divcareered/missouri_connections_news_room.htm

