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Specialized curricula at MPS enhancing college enrollment

MILWAUKEE – A report released today by the Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum finds that Milwaukee Public Schools students recently enrolled in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Project Lead the Way, and Career and Technical Education curricula were more likely to attend college than students who had not been exposed to such curricula. The report also cautions, however, that the positive impacts associated with those curricula may vary by gender, race and other factors.

The report's findings are based on a comprehensive analysis of the course enrollment of recent MPS graduates, which was matched with a national college database that provides insight on college-going behavior. While the data cannot determine if specialized curricula are *causing* higher college enrollment, it can demonstrate if the two are associated.

“Specialized programs such as Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate have long been considered gateways to college by offering a taste of college-level work, while Project Lead the Way and Career and Technical Education have sought to prepare students more directly for post-graduation success through exposure to careers and skills training,” says Andrew Pendola, the Forum’s 2012-13 Norman N. Gill Fellow and lead author of the report. “Our analysis examines whether these special curricular options are truly special in the context of college- and career-ready objectives.”

The Forum's investigation of the impact of specialized curricula on MPS postsecondary outcomes produced two main findings:

- **MPS students who enroll in specialized high school courses generally are more likely to enroll in a postsecondary institution.** Broadly speaking, specialized curricula “works.” Every specialized program demonstrated a statistically higher rate of postsecondary enrollment for participants over the sample period as compared to students who were not exposed to specialized curricula. In addition, students who took greater numbers of specialized courses were even more likely to enroll in postsecondary schooling.
- **Postsecondary enrollment trends for students with specialized high school coursework are not the same for all student groups.** The effect of specialized courses varies widely by student demographic group and by type of curricular program. Some programs show promise for shrinking the racial matriculation gap.

The report also includes the following key findings on specific specialized programs:

- MPS graduates with AP and International Baccalaureate experience are more likely to attend a postsecondary institution than graduates with no such experience. Furthermore, the greater the number of AP and IB courses taken by a student, the greater the likelihood of that student attending a postsecondary institution.
- MPS graduates with Project Lead the Way experience are more likely than non-PLTW graduates to enroll in postsecondary institutions, with particular success for male, Hispanic, white and at-risk PLTW graduates.
- Between 2008-2011, a greater percentage of Career and Technical Education graduates reported attending a postsecondary institution than the average MPS graduate.

“It is important to note while these results are encouraging, they should not necessarily be interpreted as a green light for full-scale implementation of specialized curricula,” says Pendola. “AP courses, for example, impact various segments of MPS students differently, with discrepancies between gender, ethnicity, and economic status.”

The report concludes that while its findings support an increased emphasis on specialized curricula at MPS under the banner of college and career readiness, they do not support expansion without careful consideration of the student body, budget, and administrative resources.

“Indeed, the drive towards college and career readiness should be advanced with strategic and relevant information. It is hoped that the report will spur more in-depth analysis of the financial and administrative costs of specialized curricular implementation, as well as provide local and state education leaders with information on the value of these programs.”

The full report can be downloaded at the Forum’s web site, www.publicpolicyforum.org. The report was produced under the Forum’s Norman N. Gill Fellowship, an initiative funded by the family of Norman N. Gill, the organization’s director from 1945 to 1984. The Fellowship offers a Milwaukee-area graduate student the opportunity to conduct a policy research project under the tutelage of Forum staff while engaged in academic studies.

Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum, established in 1913 as a local government watchdog, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness of government and the development of southeastern Wisconsin through objective research of public policy issues.

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