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Report shows Colorado struggling to educate

By Danie Harrelson

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Colorado trails much of the country when it comes to closing the academic achievement gap among minorities, according to a statewide report based in part on high school graduation and college enrollment and completion rates.

The Denver-based Donnell-Kay Foundation, which aims to improve education in Colorado, released its State Accountability Report in partnership with other education advocates this week.

“Our assessment shows that as a state we are struggling to educate our total student population and failing to meet the needs of low-income and minority students,” said Tony Lewis, executive director of the Donnell-Kay Foundation.

The foundation, in conjunction with the Colorado Children’s Campaign, Piton Foundation and the Center for Education Policy Analysis at the University of Colorado at Denver, timed the release of its statewide report with the release of the state’s so-called “report cards” on teacher salaries, dropout rates and overall academic scores for each of its 1,800 schools. The annual accountability reports dole out five overall ratings for schools — unsatisfactory, low, average, high or excellent — depending on the performance of students who took the CSAP that year.

The Donnell-Kay Foundation took a statewide approach to examining academic performance in Colorado in order to give Coloradans context when reading the reports on their local schools.

The foundation’s report based its own statewide ratings on high school graduation rates, college enrollment and completion figures and other academic indicators. Colorado’s overall academic performance received an average score, while its overall academic achievement gap earned an unsatisfactory rating.

The report gave Colorado’s high school graduation rates an average rating and ranked it 30th in the nation.

Break down those numbers and the scores fall a bit, according to the report.

Graduation rates among African-American high school students ranked 28th or average, among states, while graduation rates for Hispanic high school students rank 42nd or unsatisfactory.

Colorado's college enrollment rates earned an average rating and ranked it 23rd among states in the report. Minority enrollment garnered the state an unsatisfactory rating and 48th place, while enrollment among low-income students earned the state a low rating and 35th place.

The report ranked the state 38th, or low, when it comes to its student performance gap by income. The white/Hispanic gap puts the state in 39th place or low among states, while the white/black gap puts the state in 21st place or average.

When it comes to college readiness, the state placed 22nd or average, the report said. Colorado landed 27th or average among states when it comes to college completion rates.

The sole categories in which the state scored excellent rating were its population of adults with college degrees and its wealth. The state's population of adults with college degrees holds the No. 2 spot in the nation, according to the report.

But the state's education system can't take credit for that.

"Unfortunately, Colorado's well-educated, wealthy adult population is not the result of a strong education system, but rather due to the fact that such people happen to move here," Lewis said.

Mesa State College aims to reverse the apparent trend by giving low-income and minority students, many who are the first in their family to attend college, a support network.

"Their parents didn't go to college," Mesa State President Tim Foster said. "They don't have someone to say, 'This is what you do in this situation.'"

That effort covers multiple facets of student life, from the residence halls to the athletic field, he said.

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