

Reports fuel school reform effort

Written by [Kelley Atherton](#), [The Triplicate](#) December 05, 2011 07:14 pm

New concerns on achievement and attendance



Graph created by: The California Center for Rural Policy at Humboldt State University <http://www.humboldt.edu/ccrp/>
Data Source: California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Office <http://sds.cde.ca.gov/demog/>

Two recent reports are fueling the movement to reform Del Norte County’s public schools.

Data shows local students lag behind the state average on standardized test scores and many are not ready for college after graduation. A large number of students are also missing a great deal of school — some more than 20 percent of the year.

And a survey of students found that they want to be challenged and taught more information that has real-world relevance. They also crave better communication with their teachers and assistance figuring out how to achieve career goals.

These are statistics and survey results that school officials and many people in Del Norte would like to see turned around.

It’s not just test scores that worry educators and community members, but that many students are not engaged in school and enter adulthood without direction toward college or a career.

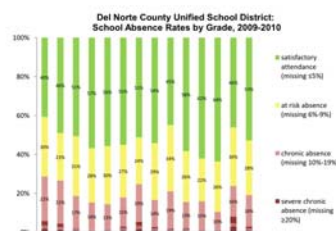
The Del Norte County Unified School District enlisted a group of teachers and administrators, the District Educational Leadership Team and Associates (DELTA), to look at ways to reform the system.

The team has been studying education models and talking about how the public school system can better serve students so they graduate highly educated and well-rounded, with a strong work ethic and the skills necessary for college or a vocational career.

DELTA will soon recommend a new educational model for Del Norte schools to the School Board on.

Some shocking surprises

The California Endowment commissioned two studies on education in Del Norte to provide data on how kids were faring in the school system.



Graph created by: The California Center for Rural Policy at Humboldt State University <http://www.humboldt.edu/ccrp/>
Data Source: Del Norte County Unified School District. Analysis conducted under the direction of Holly Cheng, Director, Attendance Work.
Note: Absences include both excused and unexcused absences. This graph includes the following schools: Bass Maxwell, Joe Hamilton, Margaret Keating, Mary Peacock, Mountain, Pine Grove, Redwood, Smith River, Crescent Elk, and Del Norte High School.

“One of the first questions to answer was, according to data, how are our kids doing?” said Geneva Wiki, a coordinator for the endowment’s Building Health Communities efforts in Del Norte and adjacent tribal lands.

The results “definitely invoked a reaction in the community,” Wiki said.

One report is from the California Center for Rural Policy at Humboldt State University: “Del Norte County: A Look at Educational Achievement.”

Among its revelations:

- Less than half of Del Norte’s youngest students regularly attend school.

- About 20 percent of high school graduates are prepared for a state university or the local community college.

The number of kindergartners and first-graders who had missed an excessive amount of school was surprising to many, Wiki said.

Lisa Howard, a teacher at Del Norte High School and a member of DELTA, found the data shocking.

“There are major attendance problems,” Howard said. “We need to figure what is the cause of that.”

The report also presented data on test scores that has been widely reported in the past: While more students are reaching proficiency on state standards tests, Del Norte’s numbers are still below the state as a whole.

Meanwhile, student opinions were gathered in a Youth Truth survey of 1,126 high-schoolers to find out what they think about their school. Students at Del Norte High School, Castle Rock Charter School, Klamath River Early College of the Redwoods and Sunset High School were surveyed.

Many students said they didn’t feel prepared for life after high school.

Students’ plans for after high school were “telling,” Wiki said. A significant number were not sure what they were going to do.

The survey found students want more rigorous course work and more relevance between their outside interests and their course work, Wiki said.

The two reports provide “real baseline data from an independent source,” Wiki said.

This data “gives us a picture of how we’re doing right now,” said Wiki, who is also the executive director of the Wild Rivers Community Foundation.

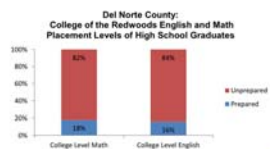
Del Norte was selected as one of 14 communities in California to be part of the Building Healthy Communities initiative to improve the health of local people.

At community meetings on the biggest problems that impact Del Norters’ health, many people expressed concerns about kids’ educational opportunities and how that affects whether they become healthy adults who contribute to the local economy. Those concerns prompted the studies to be commissioned.

What’s at stake

According to “A Look at College of the Redwoods Achievement,” educated people tend to be more healthy:

“Indeed, education level may be the strongest and most consistent predictor of good health, rather than income or occupation,” the “Educational Achievement” report states.



Those with a lower level of education tend to be smokers, have high blood pressure, high cholesterol and shorter life expectancy, according to the report. People with more education are more likely to exercise more, eat healthier, and abstain from smoking, the report states.

Most adults in Del Norte didn’t complete high school or just have a diploma. About 27 percent have some college experience, 8 percent have an associate’s degree, 10 percent have a bachelor’s degree and less than 5 percent have a graduate or professional degree.

The report shows that a person’s level of education correlates to annual income.

Those with no high school diploma make on average \$17,214 a year and those who graduated make \$25,247. Those with a bachelor’s degree average \$35,649 a year and those with a graduate or professional degree average \$63,125.

Attendance and achievement

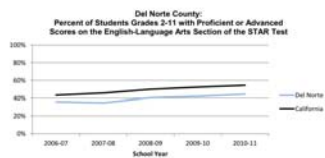
School officials are concerned about the number of young learners in kindergarten and first grade who are consistently absent from school. The study did nothing to allay those concerns.

Most Del Norte students of all ages, 53 percent, regularly attend class, but the rest miss a number of school days, the study found.

In kindergarten, first, eighth and 12th grades, more than half of students were missing 6-20 percent of school during 2009-2010.

“It’s really hard to ever make that up,” Howard said. “It puts them behind.”

The school district is working with Attendance Works, a national organization, to develop a plan to increase attendance by monitoring student absences and intervening more aggressively on those missing too much school. The director of Attendance Works, Hedy Chang, is scheduled to speak to the School Board on Dec. 8 and to school staff members Dec. 9.



Raising attendance rates will increase student achievement, decrease the drop-out rate and improve the district’s revenue stream, said Superintendent Don Olson, noting that the district loses \$45 for every day that a student misses school. His goal is to raise the attendance rate to 96 percent.

About 38 percent of third-graders scored proficient or advanced on the English language arts California Standards Test (CST) for the 2009-2010 school year. Statewide, the number was 46 percent.

“Students who don’t read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to not graduate from high school compared to proficient readers,” the “Education Achievement” report states.

All public school students take standardized tests in a number of subjects each spring.

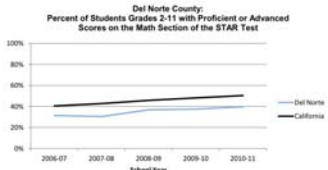
About 44 percent of students in grades 2-11 scored proficient or higher in English language arts as of the 2010-2011 school year, compared to 54 percent statewide.

About 40 percent of students in grades 2-11 scored proficient or higher on the math test, compared to 50 percent statewide.

Chronic absenteeism in the early grades is likely having an impact on student test scores, said Olson.

“When 25 percent are chronically absent, it’s going to have a negative effect,” he said.

Kindergarten and first grade are “formative years,” Olson said. The more students attend school, the more likely they are to perform well on their coursework and standardized tests. Most who are aren’t at reading level by third grade never catch up, Olson said.



Test scores in second and third grade are much lower than other grades in the school district, he said. Some students are catching up to proficiency by fourth-, fifth, sixth grade, but if more students are attending regularly, “the potential will be greater” for higher test scores, Olson said.

“We’re judged a bit by those numbers,” he said. “We want to catch up and surpass the state average. Having students attend school more often is only going to help.”

According to the “Educational Achievement” report, 20 percent of high-schoolers in Del Norte don’t graduate. For the 2009-2010 school year, the graduation rate was about 80 percent, which is the same as the statewide average. American Indian and Hispanic students were more likely to drop out of school than Asian or Caucasian students.

Of those who did graduate, about 24 percent had completed the required courses to attend a University of California or a California State University school as of 2009-2010, compared to about 36 percent statewide.

The report also found that more than 80 percent of high school graduates in Del Norte were not prepared for college-level English and math at College of the Redwoods, a two-year institution.

Alternative schools rank higher

The Youth Truth report on Del Norte students compares their average response with the average response by all students who have taken the national survey conducted by the Center for Effective Philanthropy. It gathers students’ opinions about what works and what doesn’t at their school.

At DNHS, 881 students were surveyed; at Castle Rock, 172 students; at Sunset, 53; and at Klamath River Early College of the Redwoods, 20.

“We heard the voice of high school students,” Olson said. “They want greater relationships with teachers and meaningful work.”

Students generally believe they have increased options after graduation because of the education they’re getting, according to the report. But they want more rigor in their coursework and feel they aren’t getting enough help on what to do after graduation.

Students at the alternative schools, Castle Rock, KRECR, and Sunset, highly rated their school. The ratings for those three schools are in the top 25 percent of schools that have participated in the Youth Truth survey, while DNHS’ rating is in the lowest 25 percent of all participating schools, according to the report.

Students at the alternative high schools were more likely to feel their teachers take the extra step to help with homework and understand their lives outside of school.

According to the report, students appreciate small class sizes and individualized attention — this was the most important thing their school could provide to them, they generally indicated.

Students at the three alternative high schools were more likely to think their school has increased their options after graduation. Castle Rock students were the most likely to report feeling prepared for their future as compared to their peers at other schools.

About 80 percent of students at DNHS want to go to college, the study found. However, they feel less prepared than students at other schools in Del Norte. According to the report, they don’t think their school has helped them develop the skills they need for college or the career they want.

Students speak out

Students’ names and schools were left anonymous in the Youth Truth report. Some of their comments were very positive.

"If I did not come to this school, I would not graduate on time, this school has done so much for me," wrote one. "The staff here showed that people are not all bad. They showed me that there are still people in the world that think about other people. The staff here at this school is dedicated to their students. They help you in all areas of your daily struggle. The teachers here do much more than educate. They really do help build a brighter tomorrow. I am graduating this year and my teachers and principal do not let me forget that."

Another student professed to being better motivated in school because of help from teachers.

"When I was younger I didn't really see the importance of school, therefore, I didn't do my best," the student wrote. "However beginning high school I finally did see the importance and I wanted to do better, and my teachers helped me and my grades shot up."

But there were negative comments as well.

"It's really hard coming to school and being focused when there are students that constantly harass you, call you names, threaten to beat you up," a student wrote. "I get that everyday at this school. I strongly believe that what these students have done to me is going to affect me for the rest of my life in a bad way. It's really sad that kids/adults have to deal with this."

Some students feel they aren't being challenged enough in class.

"Most teachers like to hand out worksheets all the time," a student wrote. "More than half the time we don't even actually retain any of the information, we just hurry and get it done. Sometimes it feels like they give us worksheets because they feel they have to give us work and not because they think it will actually help us."

"They told us they want to see more rigor, more relevance and more relationships," Howard said. "They're telling us where we need to go from here."

Post-graduation plans

Nationwide, most students expect to attend a two- or four-year college after high school and a small number plan to go right into a full-time job, the military or are undecided.

In Del Norte, "we have a significant number — 25 percent — who are completely undecided about what do after high school, that's a larger percentage than the rest of nation," Howard said. "We need to examine that."

Some students spoke about their post-high school plans in the Youth Truth survey.

"I think that once I graduate high school, I will become this outstanding and successful teenager that is going to get into college and once I graduate college and after that, my goal is to be an outstanding 5th grade teacher or a brilliant police officer," a student wrote.

Another wrote: "I'm not really sure where my life's going or what I'mma do when I get out. Plus I heard that if you graduate here it's hard to get into a good college but I'm thankful that this school pushed me this far, and it really did help me."

Only a small number of Del Norte students report participating in counseling services focused on post-graduation goals, according to survey results.

Students also do not frequently speak to an adult outside of their school about their future plans, according to the survey report.

"I feel that the school has helped me learn more about day to day life but it doesn't teach how important a job and what-not is, like they don't help you find a job like some other high schools do," a student wrote. "And I feel it's important to be supported when you've never had a job and don't know what you really doing. They don't teach you how to fill out the app. (application) and don't teach you on how to show your good skills and what-not."

"Our school is cutting so many programs it makes it hard to figure out what you want to do in the future," another student wrote. "There is also not a lot of information about colleges circulated throughout the school, so I think many are confused on what to do, and because not a lot of parents in Crescent City even attended college, students have no information at all."

Howard said she believes every teacher makes an effort to make a connection with students and is willing to help students achieve their goals, but maybe something is missing or there's something more they could be doing.

With funding from the Wild Rivers Community Foundation, the International Center for Leadership in Education will be doing a "needs assessment" of the district by surveying staff, students and visiting schools this month, Olson said.

The center helps school districts undergo organizational change with a specific focus on making instruction and assessments more rigorous and relevant for students.

Consultants will provide a report on Del Norte schools' strengths and weaknesses and "assist us in forming our plan," Olson said.

Here are some other findings about Del Norte schools and students from the two recent reports:

- Outside of school, students' home life is the biggest deterrent to them doing their best in school. Other responsibilities, such as having a child and romantic relationships, also hinder students' learning.
- Most students, about 70 percent, said they feel safe at home, their neighborhood and at school (less so at DNHS than other high schools, though).
- At schools that serve meals, 46 percent of students reported not eating lunch there, preferring to bring their own or get something off-campus.
- At least one in four reported not participating in any physical activity recently. Many students said they get two hours or less of physical activity a week from PE class.
- Some students suffer from debilitating depression. More than 20 percent said they frequently feel so depressed that nothing could cheer them up, but 70 percent said they have someone in their life to support them when needed.
- Del Norte has a higher expulsion and suspension rate than the state. About 30 percent of students were not allowed to attend school for a period of time for committing an offense. On average, about 15 percent of students in California had been expelled or suspended.
- About 15 percent of expulsions or suspension in Del Norte are due to violence or drugs, according to the report.

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