

## **Case of the missing juniors: Loophole lets schools raise scores by not testing low-performing students**

*By Stephanie Banchemo, Darnell Little and Tara Malone Chicago Tribune November 1, 2009*

Rich East High School has seen state test scores for its 11th-graders improve by a stunning 37 percent during the last two years -- a gain so impressive that regional education officials asked the Park Forest school to host a seminar to help others emulate its success.

There's only one problem: Rich East did not give the Prairie State Achievement Exam to about 40 percent of its juniors last school year. And it excluded the ones furthest behind academically.

It's not the only school to keep the most underachieving students off the books, according to a Tribune analysis of new state Report Card test data.

School districts statewide are using a loophole that allows them to define what constitutes a "junior." By ratcheting up the credit hour requirements, schools are disqualifying thousands of third-year high school students from taking the 11th-grade exam that is the primary tool to hold the schools accountable for student achievement.

Many then take the test as seniors, but their scores are not used for state and federal No Child Left Behind accountability purposes. In fact, the state does not even track how well seniors perform on the test.

School officials say that giving students more time in class better prepares them for the exam.

Still, a Tribune analysis found that 20 percent of Illinois sophomores didn't officially advance to junior-level status last year and, therefore, never took the exam.

"This is one of the most interesting and deceptive ways I've seen to get around No Child Left Behind," said Andy Smarick, with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. "Uncle Sam can make states do things they don't want to do but cannot make them do it well. This is a perfect example of that."

Since No Child Left Behind was enacted, educators across the country have used inventive means to get around the sanctions, which can force underperforming schools to provide free tutoring or even close. In Illinois, state officials lowered the passing bar on the elementary exam and made it easier for schools to disqualify test scores of transfer students.

Officials with the Illinois State Board of Education have known for years that schools were reclassifying juniors. But the practice became so pervasive last year, state officials said they launched an investigation. They will not provide any details of what they uncovered, saying they will present their findings to the state testing review committee this month.

"This is not an appropriate way to engage in the accountability system," said Joyce Zurkowski, who oversees student assessment for the Illinois State Board of Education. "This is an

accountability test, and it's the gauge of how ready students are. By keeping out the kids who are most at risk, you are not being held accountable."

School officials defend the practice. They say students who do not have enough credit hours to qualify as juniors are ill-prepared to take the rigorous state exam, which includes the ACT college entrance test.

"We are most focused on doing what is right for the students, not on the accountability rules of the federal government," said Mark Kramer, principal of Rich East High School. "The PSAE includes a college entrance exam, and we want to make sure our kids are prepared for it so they can do well and go on to college. I don't know how anyone could argue with that approach."

Jessica Calhoun, a fourth-year Rich East student, fell behind last year and did not have enough credit hours to qualify as a "junior." Calhoun, who wants to go to the University of Illinois, said she's glad she did not take the PSAE last year.

"I wasn't ready," said Calhoun, 18, who will take the two-day test this year. "If you're not ready, you get nervous, then you do bad. Now I'm a more serious student, so I can do better on it."

Classmate Tony Tooks agrees. Tooks, 17, also fell behind in credits and did not take the PSAE during his third year last spring.

"Doesn't matter when the law says you should take it," he said. "You should take it when you're ready."

It's impossible to know exactly how many third-year high school students skipped the PSAE last school year because they were not counted as juniors.

But a Tribune analysis shows there were about 167,000 sophomores in 2007-08. By last school year -- when this class moved into its junior year -- only about 133,000 took the exam, according to the state data.

So 34,000 students -- about 20 percent of the original sophomore class -- either dropped out, transferred out of state or, most likely, simply were not counted as juniors.

In many cases, the missing students then reappear on state enrollment data as seniors come to their fourth year, according to state data. So, in effect, they were never classified as juniors on state enrollment data.

Traditionally, Illinois high schools have determined what class a student is in based on years in school. In the last five years, however, many districts began basing it on credit hours completed. At Rich East, for example, students need 12 credits to advance to junior status. In Chicago Public Schools, they need 11.

More recently, districts ratcheted up the requirements by insisting that students complete specific courses in math, English, social studies and science before they advance. As a result, thousands

of students have not advanced as juniors.

How widespread is the practice? In 130 of the state's 660 high schools, at least a quarter of students dropped off the radar between sophomore year and junior test-taking time, according to a Tribune analysis of 2009 test score data.

At Rich East High School, about 200 juniors took the PSAE every year from 2002 to 2005. As the credit hour requirements tightened, however, more sophomores were held back, and the number of test takers dropped, hitting 123 last year, test data show. Overall school enrollment remained fairly stable.

Kramer, the Rich East principal, said the school began tracking credit hours at every grade level and has instituted programs to help students catch up. He also points out that his school uses the same classification system as the district's other schools, yet Rich East surpassed them on test score gains.

The tougher credit hour requirements have left many juniors behind at Thornton Township High School.

In 2005, 385 Thornton juniors took the PSAE. The next year, the district changed how juniors were classified, and the number of test takers dropped to 272. Last year, only 228 students took the exam, even though the overall school enrollment has remained relatively steady, the state data show.

The school's PSAE score jumped from 16 percent passing in 2005 to 27 percent this year.

Tom Truesdale, associate superintendent of Thornton School District 205 in the south suburbs, defended the district's decision to reclassify students.

"I don't see this as gaming the system," he said. "We want to make sure students are adequately prepared. The credit hour requirements are used so students can adequately matriculate through the system and be ready to meet graduation requirements."

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