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Lack of students ready for college worries experts

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An Inland Empire report released Thursday hammers on high-schoolers for not attending college immediately after graduation, but a look at district data shows that only about a quarter of Coachella Valley students graduate with the necessary courses to enroll in a four-year state university.

The report, prepared by the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at Sacramento State University, showed that 37.4 percent of Inland Empire high-schoolers, which covers Riverside and San Bernardino counties, went to college directly after high school in 2005.

That's less than the 52.3 percent of students who did so statewide.

"California has a declining trend over the last decade in college-going directly from high school, and that's a strong concern for us because going to college right after high school leads to the greatest chances of success," said Abdi Soltani, executive director of the Campaign for College Opportunity, a bipartisan organization dedicated to ensuring adequate access, participation and success in higher education. The group released the report with Sacramento State.

District data show that even at

By the numbers

The number of high school graduates who were academically eligible in to attend California State University or the University of California in 2005:

Coachella Valley Unified: 119 of 736 graduates, or about 16 percent
Desert Sands Unified: 430 of 1,544 graduates, or about 27 percent
Palm Springs Unified: 265 of 1,049 graduates, or about 25 percent
Statewide: 124,984 of 355,225 graduates, or about 35 percent

The percentage of high school graduates going directly to a two-year or four-year university in 2005:

Inland Empire (including Riverside and San Bernardino counties): 37.4 percent
California: 52.3 percent

Desert Sands Unified School District, which had the highest level of prepared students, only 27 percent of 2005-06 students graduated with the necessary requirements to enroll at either of the California State University or the University of California systems.

In that same year, 35 percent of students statewide graduated with the required courses.

In Palm Springs Unified School System, 25 percent of the 2005-06 grads met the requirements to

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apply to Cal State and UC schools.

In Coachella Valley Unified, 16 percent of the 2005-06 grads met the requirements.

Tom Wixon, spokesman for the College of the Desert, said the Coachella Valley has unique issues that make it more difficult to get students up to par — namely, English-language learners and immigrants, who frequently move and often do not have parents who attended college.

"It has to do with the population we've had and the educational opportunity they've had or not had as children," Wixon said. "I think the K-12 system is working very, very hard to fix that, but they have a cultural and language barrier they have to work with."

At the community college, which enrolled 10,005 students in fall 2005, nearly 5,500 were Latino.

California's community colleges do not have course requirements and accept nearly all comers.

"Often we have to put students in a remedial math class, sometimes remedial English, but then, they can move on and do college-

level work after that," he said.

Many of the college's students do move on to a four-year university, but Wixon stressed that many more attend College of the Desert to take courses to enhance their careers or get a promotion.

"We're not just the front end of a four-year college," he said.

That's what's misleading about California's education system, said Nancy Shulock, author of the Sacramento State University report.

California received praise from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education in September for leading the nation in enrollment of working-age adults. In 2006, 5.3 percent of California's adult population was taking college-level courses.

Shulock called it an "important misconception."

"We have very high levels of college participation, but these levels of enrollment are not translating into educated individuals — they do not earn an education credential.

"It's a two-edged sword. We're very accommodating for older adults returning to college, but we do it in a way that does not foster their success," she said. "We need to send a message that it's better

to be prepared and go to college early."

At Coachella Valley High School, Lynette Wohlmuth tries to emphasize that point by taking students to campuses across the state.

"Most kids I deal with in this program are first-generation and need a lot of help. They're asking 'How do I pick a college?' 'What college is right for me?'" said Wohlmuth, who directs the Catch the Dream program which aims to increase the number of students who move onto four-year universities by educating them about their options.

Every June, she takes students on a tour of northern California universities. A favorite is California State University at Stanislaus, which caters to Coachella Valley's Spanish-speaking population.

If students decide to apply, Wohlmuth will make a second trip the following spring, just before final decision time, and allow the parents to tag along.

She said sometimes educating the parents is the biggest hurdle because many of them never have attended college.

"It's a constant battle. You never can do enough to communicate with the parents," she said.