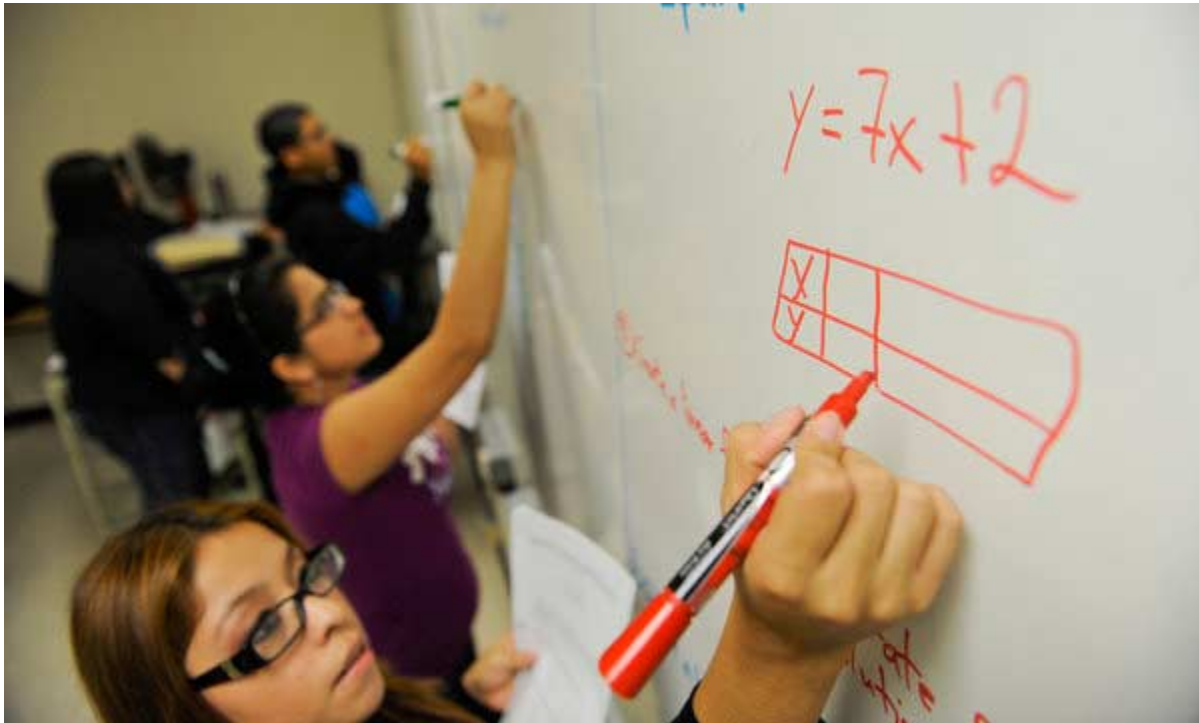


ON EDUCATION

In College, Working Hard to Learn High School Material



Students getting remedial instruction at LaGuardia Community College.

By MICHAEL WINERIP

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In June, Desiree Smith was graduated from Murry Bergtraum High. Her grades were in the 90s, she said, and she had passed the four state Regents exams. Since enrolling last month at LaGuardia Community College in Queens, Ms. Smith, 19, has come to realize that graduating from a New York City public high school is not the same as learning.

She failed all three placement tests for LaGuardia and is now taking remediation in reading, writing and math. So are Nikita Thomas, of Bedford Stuyvesant Prep; Sade Washington, of the Young Women's Leadership School in East Harlem; Stacey Sumulong, of Queens Vocational and Technical; Lucrecia Woolford of John Adams High; and Juan Rodriguez of Grover Cleveland High. "Passing the Regents don't mean nothing," Ms. Thomas said. "The main focus

in high school is to get you to graduate; it makes the school look good. They get you in and get you out.”

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg has made the rising graduation rate — to 61 percent in June, from 46.5 percent in 2005 — the No. 1 symbol of his educational accomplishments. But that rate is less impressive when paired with the percentage of graduates who need remediation in all three subjects when they enter LaGuardia or other City University of New York community colleges: 22.6 percent in 2010 (2,812 students), up from 15.4 percent in 2005 (1,085).

“A few years ago, we noticed the numbers really jump,” said John Mogulescu, the senior university dean for CUNY. Over all, 74 percent of city high school graduates enrolled at the system’s six community colleges take remediation in at least one subject, but those needing all three are at the highest risk of dropping out. So in 2008, CUNY started a program with a few dozen students to see if an intensive semester focused on just the three subjects — five hours a day, five days a week — could make a difference. The program, known as Start, has since expanded.

Of the 302 enrolled so far, 241 stayed the entire semester, 159 of whom were able to pass all three remediation tests. This semester, the plan was to have 630 Start students at the six campuses, but there was such demand, more than 700 were accepted.

A major attraction is cost. Full-time students at LaGuardia pay \$1,800 a semester; three remedial classes would dominate a schedule without counting toward graduation. Start costs \$75.

“The \$75 was big,” said Ms. Smith, who has been working at a McDonald’s since she was 14.

She and the others say that the Start courses go deeper than their high school classes did, and that teachers ask open-ended questions. “In math in high school if you got called on to answer a problem and gave no answer, the teacher moved on,” said Pedro Vargas, a 2011 graduate of Richmond Hill High in Queens. “Here they keep asking, they want you to explore.”

Most Start instructors do not have traditional academic backgrounds. Sarah Eisenstein, who teaches reading and writing, worked in adult education. One day last week she did a lesson on interpretation versus text-based evidence, using a short story by Nicholasa Mohr. She had numbered each of the 74 paragraphs beforehand, making it easier to cite and follow evidence.

Ms. Eisenstein does not feel obliged to talk when it gets quiet. “So they fill the silence,” she said. “It takes a lot of practice.” And while she works to prepare them for the tests, she does not do test prep. “For us, the depth is more important than the breadth.”

Ms. Washington, 18, said that in high school, a lot of time was spent gaming the system. “The big thing they cared about was keeping the graduation rate up,” she said. “Whatever they had to do to get you to graduate — if it means like a little trick to get you out, tell you to do this, do that and you’re out.”

Shael Polakow-Suransky, the city’s chief academic officer, said that standards had not been lowered to graduate more students, pointing out that since 2007 the state has added one Regents

exam each year as a requirement to graduate. He also said part of the reason remediation had risen was that in 2008 CUNY raised the math score needed to pass the placement test.

But he also said, “We think the numbers are unacceptable.”

Mr. Polakow-Suransky said that Regents tests should be overhauled because they drive the curriculum, yet do not measure what students need to know for college. Many of the students who require remediation are scoring between the 65 needed to pass and the 75 the state has set as the score to be college-ready. “The real solution is not to play around with the cut scores,” he said. “It’s to give kids more challenging, rich and authentic work.”

Community colleges have their own reasons to create programs like Start. A recent study by Complete College America found that 13.9 percent of community college students get an associate’s degree within three years. But for those who require remediation, the number drops to 9.5 percent. (CUNY’s most recent three-year graduation rate was 15.5 percent.)

The Start program worked for Nathan Rambharose, who participated in 2009. He said the course gave him the tools to learn. His current grade-point average at LaGuardia is 3.2. His plan is to graduate this spring, go on to get a bachelor’s degree, and eventually become an information-technology instructor in the public schools.

Mr. Rambharose goes to college at night, after working from 5 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. in a bookstore at La Guardia Airport. One of the best things about the job, he said, is that when the store is empty, he can read the books. Recently he has finished “Three Cups of Tea,” “A Thousand Splendid Suns” and “The Kite Runner.”

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Robert Gebeloff contributed reporting.

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