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The Opinion Pages | EDITORIAL

Guess Who's Taking Remedial Classes

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD MAY 10, 2016

Affluent communities often assume that their well-appointed schools are excellent and that educational malpractice affects only the children of the poor. Former Education Secretary Arne Duncan, who stepped down in December, was widely criticized when he debunked this myth three years ago and went on to suggest that well-to-do parents who rebelled against the rigorous Common Core learning standards were part of the problem.

The idea that schools in privileged communities are failing to prepare significant numbers of students is borne out in a striking new study showing that nearly half of the students who begin their college careers taking remedial courses come from middle- and upper-income families. Not only do remedial courses add more than \$1 billion each year to students' bills for tuition, but students who start out in these classes take longer to graduate and are far more likely to drop out.

The study, by Education Reform Now, a nonprofit think tank, analyzes cost and course data collected by the Education Department for students who entered college in 2011. More than a half-million poorly prepared students — or about one in four — were required to take remedial courses in math, English or writing. Forty-five percent of them came from middle-, upper-middle- and high-income families.

Fifty-seven percent of the students needing remedial classes attended public

community colleges. The rest went to other schools, including private four-year nonprofit colleges and universities.

The costs to families are considerable. For example, remedial students at private, nonprofit four-year schools spent an average of \$12,000 extra to study content that should have been learned in high school. The total cost for all students and their families for remediation was nearly \$1.5 billion for the 2011-12 school year.

The cost can be measured not just in dollars, but also in unmet goals. Among full-time students seeking a bachelor's degree, those who take remedial courses are 74 percent more likely to drop out of college than nonremedial students.

The study challenges commonly held preconceptions about who needs extra help in college. At private, nonprofit four-year schools, for example, students whose families were in the top 20 percent of income nationally actually took more remedial courses than students in the bottom 20 percent at the same colleges.

The study does not indicate the specific places where these higher-income students grew up. But the income data suggest that many come from suburban communities whose schools did not prepare them for college-level work. Part of the problem is that high schools offer a rigorous curriculum for relatively few students and often use a grading system that masks underperformance.

Wealthier districts have been strongholds of the movement against standardized testing and the Common Core learning standards, which have been adopted by more than 40 states and set ambitious goals for what students should learn as they move through school.

As the study notes, many elected officials, parents and teachers have become complacent about the quality of their schools. This complacency is making it harder for the country to build the kind of education system it needs — one that provides high-level instruction for all children.

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A version of this editorial appears in print on May 10, 2016, on page A22 of the New York edition with the headline: Guess Who's Taking Remedial Classes.

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