

## LPS graduation rate highest in decade



11 HOURS AGO • BY MARGARET REIST / LINCOLN JOURNAL STAR

Lincoln Public Schools' 83 percent graduation rate is the highest in a decade, a figure officials say is evidence of a concerted effort to reach struggling students and help them get on track.

The rate has jumped 2.6 percentage points since last year, and although there still is a gap between the graduation rates of white and minority students, the district has seen substantial gains for black and Hispanic students.

The graduation rate for Hispanic students jumped 8 points, from 64 percent to 72 percent, and 9 points for black

students, from 67 percent to 76 percent.

The rate for Native students dropped 13 points, from 65 percent to 52 percent, although there are such a small number of Native students the rate can show dramatic changes from year to year. Native students continue to graduate at one of the lowest rates in the district.

Asian students' 80 percent graduation rate stayed essentially the same as in 2011. The graduation rate for white students climbed from 84 to 86 percent.

Jane Stavem, LPS associate superintendent for instruction, is pleased with the gains.

"I think it says people are really working hard at the building level," she said. "More than ever before, that's being done student by student."

Figures used in this story are primarily from the Nebraska Department of Education.

LPS is in the process of changing how it figures its graduation rate so it matches the way the state does it. Both methods look at a four-year rate based on students who began as freshmen. The state's method includes students who transfer in, but LPS's system does not.

The result is slightly different numbers: State calculations show the LPS graduation rate at 83.3 percent. LPS calculations put it at 84.7 percent. LPS officials will continue figuring it both ways, so they can look at long-term trends.

One of those long-term trends shows the district's graduation rate increasing 8 points in the past decade, from 76.5 percent in 2003 to 84.7 percent in 2012.

Using LPS numbers since 2003, graduation rates for Hispanic students have increased by nearly 23 percent; black students by nearly 21 percent; Native students by 9 percent, Asian students by nearly 10 percent and white students by 8 percent.

Last year, nearly 7 percent of the students who did not graduate remained in school as fifth-year seniors.

Raising the graduation rate is one of the district's strategic plan goals, but it has been a particular focus of administrators for the past several years. Two years ago, the district received a five-year, \$4.5 million grant to raise graduation rates at Northeast, North Star and Lincoln high schools.

The grant is focused primarily on ninth-graders, because the chances of graduating increases

dramatically when students pass all their classes, don't get suspended and are in school at least 90 percent of the time during their first year.

But T.J. McDowell, who is administering the grant, said many of the gains in the past two years were largely the result of efforts before the grant.

"I've been really impressed by what was already happening in the buildings," McDowell said.

Two of the most important things McDowell has seen is schools tracking students' progress, catching problems early and helping them get back on track; and creating a school culture focused on post-high school plans, whether that's a four-year degree, associate's degree or the military.

"One of the most important things you can do is create a college-going culture so that it makes schooling relevant," he said. "So everyone knows high school is the first step and you're getting ready for the next step, whatever that may be."

While graduation rates at Lincoln High and Southwest stayed essentially the same, those at North Star, Northeast and Southeast all saw significant gains: Southeast's jumped 6 points (82 to 88); North Star's, 5 points (76 to 81); and Northeast's, 8 points (75 to 83). East High saw a 2-point gain, from 89 to 91 percent.

Northeast has seen some of the biggest gains. From 2010 to 2012, its overall graduation rate jumped 11 points (72 to 83); the rate for Native students, 42 points (25 to 67); Hispanic students, 35 points (48 to 83); and black students, 19 points (68 to 87).

Northeast is particularly good at using data to track students and helping them with post-high school plans, McDowell said. Districtwide, advocates for at-risk minority students help keep them on track and work with families, and struggling students get extra help in math or reading.

The challenge going forward will be finding the money to keep in place programs that help students, Stavem said.

"You prove (programs) work, then it's sustainability. How do we keep them in place, how do we keep them working? That will be our priority."