

Jefferson City High School and other similar-sized public high schools have reflected a Missouri-wide trend over the past 10 years: fewer graduates have been going on to four-year colleges right out of high school. Instead, more graduates have been attending two-year colleges or entering the workforce.

Among Missouri's class of 2009, about 60 percent of public high school graduates reported six months after graduation that they were attending college, according to data reported to the state's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

That percentage had not really changed as of the end of the 2018 school year — the most recent for which data is available from DESE.

But the state's data does show about 2 percent fewer Missouri public high school graduates reported attending a four-year college six months after graduation compared to 10 years earlier. At the same time, less than 1 percent more students reported attending a two-year college, and almost 4 percent more students reported being employed.

The trends can be even more pronounced at individual high schools. For example, between 2009-18, almost 10 percent fewer of JCHS's graduates reported attending college six months after graduation, and more than 16 percent fewer students reported attending a four-year college in particular.

More than 6 percent more JCHS students reported attending a two-year college, and 14 percent more students reported they were employed.

JCPS Director of Secondary Education Gary Verslues said he thinks the two main reasons for those trends are the state's A+ Scholarship Program and the continued increase in the school district's rate of students' eligibility for free or reduced-price lunches — from 43 percent in 2009 to 59 percent in 2018.

"More and more students are working to help support the family," Verslues said of what the increase in the meal subsidy rate means.

Other public high schools of similar enrollment and with comparable free or reduced-price lunch eligibility rates saw the same trends to some degree.

Those high schools comparable to JCHS are located in or near St. Louis, Troy, Kansas City and Joplin. Of those eight high schools — Blue Springs, Hazelwood Central, Hazelwood West, Joplin, Lee's Summit West, Lindbergh Senior, Marquette Senior and Troy Buchanan — half also showed significant decreases over the past decade in the percentages of their graduates who reported attending a four-year college. The other four high schools showed increases ranging from just over 1 to more than 10 percent.

Four of those high schools — Hazelwood Central and West, Joplin and Troy Buchanan — had eligibility rates for free or reduced-price lunch similar to JCHS and showed decreased attendance at four-year colleges.

JCHS's free or reduced-price lunch eligibility rate in 2018 was 47.9 percent. Hazelwood Central High School had the highest rate of the group at 52.4 percent.

Of the eight high schools examined by the News Tribune, five showed an increase in the percentage of students attending a two-year college six months after graduation. Most of those high schools had closely comparable free or reduced-price lunch eligibility rates as JCHS.

Only one school of the eight — Marquette Senior High School in western St. Louis County— showed an increase in the percentage of students attending either a four-year or two-year college, though it was a less than one-quarter of 1 percent increase for two-year schools and almost 10 percent for four-year schools. Marquette Senior had the third-lowest free or reduced-price lunch eligibility rate out of the group of eight high schools.

An A+ reason behind trend?

It's possible the A+ Scholarship Program has contributed to the trend of more students choosing to attend a two-year college immediately after high school, which is supported by the findings of a study from the University of Missouri.

José Muñoz, James Harrington, Bradley Curs and Mark Ehlert — as doctoral candidates in educational leadership and policy analysis at the University of Missouri — published a study in *The Journal of Higher Education* in 2016 that found the A+ program has “provided a democratizing effect by increasing overall post-secondary enrollment, while simultaneously creating a diversionary effect through increased two-year enrollment and a decline in four-year enrollment,” according to the study's abstract.

The A+ program was established in Missouri in 1993 to encourage all high school students to graduate with more rigorous studies and to go on to college or directly into a high-wage job. High school students who attend a designated high school and graduate with the required grade point average, attendance record, completed hours of tutoring or mentoring, citizenship record, and other stipulations are eligible to receive money to attend designated two-year schools — usually community colleges or career, technical or vocational education schools.

All of the high schools the News Tribune analyzed are participants in the program.

‘A huge incentive’

Hazelwood West High School Principal Dennis Newell said the financial rewards for students who meet the requirements of the A+ program are difficult to pass up, and that contributes to more students choosing two-year colleges immediately after high school.

“This year, 33 percent of our senior class will be listed as A+ scholars. They'll have an opportunity

to have the first two years of college for free. That's a huge incentive," Newell said.

He added: "When we register our seniors, our guidance department actually flags students that we're registering, that by their credits and by their history, we see that they're going to be eligible for the A+ scholar program. We flag them just so that we can let them know, 'Hey, you're eligible for this; this is something you need to take advantage of.'"

Of the nine high schools including JCHS that the News Tribune analyzed, Hazelwood West in northern St. Louis County showed the biggest increase over the past 10 years in the percentage of its graduates who reported attending a two-year college right after high school — a 16 percent increase, compared to a more than 35 percent decrease in the percentage of its graduates who chose to attend a four-year college right after high school.

Asked whether how students are prepared for graduation drives post-graduation trends or if graduation prep is simply following students' interest, Newell said: "I think it's both."

Verslues, too, said: "It is a combination of both. As part of the transition from middle school to high school, eighth-grade students along with counselors begin working on a student's Individual Career and Academic Plan. Through conversations and interest inventories, this plan is developed as a student prepares for high school and becomes a working document all through high school when counselors meet with students each year to review and select courses each spring for the following school year."

Other post-graduation paths

Employment is another post-high school graduation path students choose, and JCHS had the biggest increase over the past decade of its graduates reporting being employed six months later, among the nine schools the News Tribune looked at.

JCHS had a 14 percent increase in graduates reporting being employed.

On average among the nine schools over the past 10 years, about 15.1 percent of graduates reported being employed six months after high school. But at Jefferson City, Troy Buchanan and Joplin high schools, more than a quarter of graduates were reporting being employed in an average year.

On average among the nine high schools analyzed, the share of graduates who reported they were serving in the military six months after high school increased about nine-tenths of 1 percent over the past 10 years. On average over those same years, about 2.9 percent of graduates at each school reported serving in the military six months after high school.

College, employment and military service together accounted, on average, for the post-graduation paths of almost 92 percent of high school graduates over the past decade for each of the high schools the News Tribune analyzed.