

21st Century Scholars is The Answer to Educational Equity

By Teresa Lubbers, Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education

Educational equity means that a person's life circumstances or obstacles shouldn't dictate their opportunity to succeed. With that ideal in mind, the Indiana Commission for Higher Education passed a [resolution](#) in 2013 to close the achievement gaps for Indiana's learners by 2025.

To help us shine a brighter light on meeting that goal, the Commission released its first College Equity Report in 2018. The report takes an in-depth look at the gaps in learner achievement based on race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender and geography.

The new [2019 College Equity Report](#) was released in late August, and it shows that some progress is being made but unacceptable gaps remain. It also identifies our strongest tool to close those gaps: [21st Century Scholars](#), Indiana's early college promise program for low-income students.

As of today, 21st Century Scholars are the only group on track to close the achievement gap by 2025.

Here are more highlights from the report:

- Indiana's learners are more diverse and more economically-challenged now than they were 10 years ago.
- Students in the 21st Century Scholars program are outperforming their low-income peers in all metrics and exceeding the overall college-going rate for the state. The Scholars program is helping close achievement gaps among demographic groups identified in the Equity Report.
- Students perform better in postsecondary work and achievement gaps are smaller when a high school diploma is more rigorous, with the highest level of success associated with the high school Academic Honors diploma.

Indiana's students are becoming more diverse and learners also face greater income challenges: About one-third of Hoosiers were from low-income households in 2017. That's up about 8 percentage points from 2010.

While the state's college-going rate has decreased slightly over the past few years (not a surprising outcome during a strong state and national economy), some groups in Indiana face much larger declines in enrollment.

Black Hoosiers have experienced an enrollment decrease of 8 percentage points over the last five years.

Another concerning point: the one-year decline in the state's overall college-going rates can be almost entirely attributed to a decrease among young men.

What do we do about these concerning trends in enrollment?

The data show the 21st Century Scholars program can ensure equity.

21st Century Scholars are enrolling in college 86 percent of the time – far above any other demographic highlighted in the Equity Report and above the statewide average of 63 percent. The program is also closing the college-going achievement gaps among racial and ethnic groups.

It seems we have part of the answer to the question of what to do about the concerning trends.

The 21st Century Scholars program is not a silver bullet, but it's as close as we've come in Indiana to solving the most pressing issues around educational equity.

Teresa Lubbers is the Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education and chair of the Governor's Workforce Cabinet.