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**Michigan Merit Curriculum gives small boost to best students, with negative or no impact on lower achievers**

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ANN ARBOR, Mich. –The class of 2011, the first group of students exposed to the Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC) for their entire high school careers, saw mixed results.

The introduction of the MMC reduced graduation rates slightly for students who entered high school with weak academic skills. For those who entered with strong skills, there was no effect of the MMC on high school completion rates.

Performance on standardized tests rose slightly for students who entered high school with strong skills. The impact on test scores was small or negative for those who entered high school with weak skills. The best-prepared students saw better performance in science, reading and math. All students experienced declines in writing scores, according to an analysis released Monday by the Michigan Consortium for Educational Research.

The consortium is a partnership between the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, and the State of Michigan. The results of its research will be presented at a conference at the Kellogg Center in East Lansing on Monday.

Results show that the merit curriculum reduced the five-year graduation rate among lower-achieving students by approximately 4.5 percentage points (from 49 percent to 44.5 percent). The merit curriculum also appears to have prompted some students to extend their stay in high school beyond the traditional four years, perhaps in an effort to meet the more rigorous curricular requirements.

In 2006 Michigan adopted the merit curriculum, a set of high school graduation requirements that emphasize math and science. The goal was to increase the rigor of high school courses and better prepare students for college. The first students covered by the curriculum started ninthgrade in the fall of 2007 and would have been scheduled for an on-time graduation in spring 2011.

“These findings are for the first set of students subject to the new requirements. The results may change as schools and teachers gain experience with the curriculum,” said Susan Dynarski, a professor at the University of Michigan’s. Ford School of Public Policy, School of Education and Department of Economics. “As more students complete their high school years, we will find out whether the curriculum boosts college attendance and success, a key goal of the reform.”

Additional findings indicate large gaps across income groups and Michigan’s districts in high school graduation and college attendance. Four-year high school graduation rates range from less than 50 percent to over 90 percent across Michigan’s largest school districts. Fifty-seven percent of low-income freshmen graduate high school within four years, compared to 85 percent of students with higher incomes. And 31 percent of low-income students attend college within five years of entering high school, compared to 61 percent of students with higher incomes.

The Merit Curriculum also appears related to some personnel changes. Additional results released at the conference showed that the teaching staff at Michigan’s high schools has shifted toward merit curriculum subjects, with those teaching these topics rising from 58 percent in 2004 to 71 percent in 2011.

"Between 2004 and 2011, the overall number of high school teachers in Michigan fell. However, with the introduction of the MMC it appears that schools and districts focused their limited resources on teachers who taught core academic subjects,” said Kenneth Frank, a professor in the College of Education at Michigan State University.

The merit curriculum requires that students take Algebra 1, Geometry and Algebra 2, as well as Biology 1 and either Chemistry or Physics. Students must take four years of English Language Arts and complete two years of a foreign language.

“The findings of this first study are important and must be seen as a diagnostic tool for our teachers, administrators, and education leaders,” said State Superintendent Michael P. Flanagan. “The Michigan Merit Curriculum is the right direction and must be maintained. We need to delve deeper now and see how we can help schools deliver it successfully to every student in Michigan.”

The study uses data from 700,000 students enrolled in Michigan’s public high schools to examine the effects of the merit curriculum. The research was funded by a grant by the Institute of Education Sciences in the US Department of Education.

Joining Dynarski and Frank on the study are Brian A. Jacob, professor at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan, and Barbara Schneider, professor at the College of Education and Department of Sociology at Michigan State University. They will present their findings Monday at a conference that runs from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. with Flanagan scheduled for a keynote speech at 1 p.m.

The reports will be available at the MCER website (<http://www.michiganconsortium.org/>) on Monday morning.