



StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



ESEA REAUTHORIZATION SHIFTS TO MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS: Senate HELP Committee Examines Challenges Facing Secondary Schools and How ESEA Reauthorization Can Help

On May 4, the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee held the latest in its series of hearings on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The hearing, entitled “Improving America’s Secondary Schools,” examined the challenges facing the nation’s middle and high schools and explored how ESEA reauthorization can help states and school districts meet those challenges.

Chief among those challenges, according to **Senate HELP Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA)** is the “extraordinarily high” dropout rate. “Each year, 1.2 million students drop out of school; that’s 7,000 per school day,” Harkin said. “School dropouts are at a severe disadvantage compared to their peers who earn a diploma. They are more likely to be unemployed, and, over the course of a lifetime, a high school dropout will earn a quarter of a million dollars less in income than a high school graduate. The dropout crisis is also hurting our economy; a decade’s worth of high school dropouts will cost the country over three trillion dollars in lost income.”



Senator Harkin at the May 4 hearing.
(Click on the image to watch video.)

In his [opening statement](#), Harkin, shown in the image above, offered two ways that ESEA reauthorization could boost the nation’s graduation rate. First, he noted that many students exhibit academic warning signs such as frequent absences or failing grades years before they drop out. By relying on early-warning data systems, students who are struggling and at risk of dropping out can be identified as early as sixth grade.

Harkin also focused on the need to turn around the nation’s lowest-performing secondary schools—the approximately two thousand schools that represent 12 percent of the nation’s high schools but produce over 50 percent of the nation’s dropouts. He noted that only about 10 percent of federal Title I funds go to high schools even though high schools educate about 25 percent of low-income students.

In addition to graduating more students from high school, Harkin said the nation must also ensure that they are prepared to meet the challenges of higher education and the workforce.

Speaking directly after Harkin, **Senator Richard Burr (R-NC)** agreed with Harkin on the urgent need to address the dropout crisis. “This past year, 70 percent of our ninth through twelfth graders crossed the goal line on time, meaning [they earned] a diploma,” Burr said. “If this were a disease we’d call it an epidemic and we’d do whatever we needed to fix it.

Burr, shown in the image to the right, also stressed the link between education and the economy, noting that high school dropouts might be permitted to fill out job applications, but are not the ones who will be invited back for an interview. “To allow this to happen for 30 percent of our high school students is unconscionable,” Burr said. “We’ve got to fix education, we’ve got to fix the economy, and we’ve got to fulfill the promise we made to these kids. If you stick with it, if you’ll work hard, education will be the key to an unlimited opportunity for you and you will only be limited by how hard you’re willing to work and what you’re willing to put in.”



Senator Burr at the May 4 hearing.

In their testimonies, witnesses argued that ESEA reauthorization must include a greater focus on middle and high schools and agreed that all students—regardless of their income levels or backgrounds—have the ability to learn, graduate from high school, and succeed in postsecondary education.

The first witness, [Cassius Johnson, director of education policy at Jobs for the Future \(JFF\)](#), discussed his organization’s work with early college high schools, which allow low-income youth, first-generation college goers, students of color, and other young people underrepresented in higher education to simultaneously earn a high school diploma and an associate’s degree without having to pay for tuition.

With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, JFF launched a national network of early college high schools in 2002 that has expanded to more than two hundred schools in twenty-four states that serve over 40,000 students. “In the eight years since the early college design was first developed, it has proved to be an exceptional approach for increasing the likelihood that high-need students are on track for high school graduation and prepared for college,” Johnson explained.

As it tackles ESEA reauthorization, Congress should focus on middle and high schools, particularly low-performing high schools, Johnson argued. Specifically, he made a case for rigorous and fair graduation rate accountability, a focus on turning around low-performing secondary schools, systemic approaches aimed at off-track students and dropouts, and greater support for innovation.

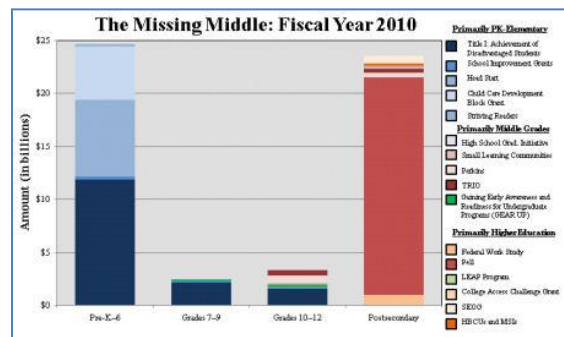
“Continuation of current trends in high school performance and graduation will lead to an unacceptable bifurcation of opportunity—a widening gulf between individuals with the skills and credentials to access higher paying careers and the poor and low-skilled who have little prospect of advancement,” Johnson said. “Unaltered, these trends pose a severe threat not only to our nation’s future economic growth but to our social fabric.”

In his testimony, [Don Deshler, professor of special education and director of the Center for Research on Learning at the University of Kansas](#), blamed low reading and comprehension skills and a lack of federal focus on middle and high schools for the nation’s high dropout rate. He discussed two “myths” that adversely affect struggling adolescent learners.

The first myth Deshler dispelled is that it is too late to do something for students once they get to middle school or high school without sufficient literacy skills. “In some schools, this attitude has led to placing these students into low-track classes, assigning them the least experienced teachers, and crossing our fingers and hoping they don’t become a disruptive force in our schools, but can hang on long enough to graduate so they don’t count against our dropout statistics,” he said.

He said a similar “there’s not much we can do” posture has been adopted from a public policy standpoint. As evidence, he pointed to the “paltry” investment the federal government has historically made in students in grades seven through twelve compared to investments made in early education and postsecondary education.

“Our investments in adolescents are only 20 percent of the total education expenditures,” Deshler said. “Since so little is invested in students in grades seven through twelve, these students, who fall into the middle of the continuum from birth to postsecondary are appropriately referred to as the ‘missing middle.’”



Contrary to the above-mentioned myth, Deshler believes that older students who struggle to read at grade level can still learn. He cited the example of Midwest Middle School in Dubuque, Iowa, where a group of sixth graders with learning disabilities were reading two to three years behind grade level and showing no signs of progress. After six months of instruction in an evidenced-based reading program (Fusion Reading), all students showed growth and 83 percent met their target growth goal.

“There are thousands around the country mirroring this kind of achievement,” Deshler said. “It is not too late to change what is happening. To buy into the myth that the gap can’t be closed is analogous to a doctor pulling the plug on a patient who is in the hospital because of a bad virus. The patient might be very ill and not functioning well, but he is not dead. There’s still hope and we need to act accordingly.”

The second myth that Deshler discussed is the mentality that investments in young children prevent problems from happening later in their education. Noting that he is a strong proponent in making investments in young children, Deshler said it is insufficient to “put all of our eggs in the early childhood basket.” As he explained, “Unlike getting inoculated for chicken pox, early literacy education does not ensure that problems won’t emerge as children grow older. As children move into middle and high school, the demands of the curriculum change dramatically and hence new and more sophisticated literacy skills are needed.”

Deshler noted that there are three pieces of legislation currently pending before Congress that would address problems in adolescent literacy: the [LEARN Act](#), the [Success in the Middle Act](#), and the [Graduation Promise Act](#). He also discussed the importance of investing in research in adolescent literacy, calling it the “engine that drives innovation and improvement on the front line.”

The next witness, [John Capozzi, principal of Elmont Memorial High School in Elmont, New York](#), discussed how his school’s focus on improving teacher effectiveness has helped provide its students with a rigorous education that prepares them for postsecondary education. He explained Elmont’s success in identifying at-risk students and providing them with individualized academic recovery plans, which include an annual review with school counselors who help students formulate goals for each school year and plan for postsecondary education. Capozzi credited these efforts, as well as Elmont’s belief that every child can learn, for the school’s 94 percent African American graduation rate and 95 percent Hispanic graduation rate.

Up next was [Rich Harrison, the middle school director for the Denver School of Science and Technology \(DSST\)](#). DSST is an open enrollment charter school that serves grades six through twelve. Harrison said DSST’s last three graduating classes posted a 100 percent acceptance rate into four-year colleges combined with a college remediation rate of only 7 percent. Forty-eight percent of its students are from low-income households while 68 percent are minority students.

As Harrison explained, DSST has created a rigorous core curriculum and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) program that engages students in the field and prepares them to succeed in STEM college majors. He estimated 47 percent of DSST students will go into STEM fields in college, compared to the national average of 14 percent.

The school attributes part of its success to its sophisticated data system, which provides teachers and students with real-time data on student performance. “Most schools that use data-driven instruction places the data in the hands of select teachers and school leaders a few times a year,” Harrison testified. “At DSST, every teacher uses technology to transform teaching and learning, harnessing powerful assessment and data tools to measure student progress towards standards on a daily basis and to adapt instruction accordingly.”

Harrison said teachers use data to develop strategies to re-teach material that students, both individually and collectively, have not mastered while students manage their own data and progress toward standards on a daily basis, giving them what they need to study and review.

Additional witnesses were [Karen Webber-Ndour, principal of the National Academy Foundation High School in Baltimore, Maryland](#), a career academy that serves four hundred students in five career-themed academies (finance, hospitality and tourism, information technology, engineering, and law) and [Tony Habit, president of the North Carolina New Schools Project](#), which was established to accelerate the pace of innovation in North Carolina while ensuring that all students have access to high-quality schools that will prepare them for college, work, and life. To date, the North Carolina New Schools Project has partnered with local school districts to create 106 innovative new secondary schools across its state.

[Watch video from the hearing or read complete witness testimony.](#)

House Education and Labor Committee Focuses on the Role of ESEA Reauthorization in Supporting Teachers and Leaders

On May 4, the U.S. House Education and Labor Committee held its own hearing on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The hearing focused on how to best support teachers and leaders in schools and featured superintendents, teacher advocates, researchers, and representatives from teacher preparation programs.

In his opening statement, [House Education and Labor Committee Chairman George Miller \(D-CA\)](#) discussed his [Local Jobs for America Act](#), which would provide \$23 billion to stave off state education budget cuts and support education jobs for teachers, janitors, cafeteria workers, guidance counselors, and principals.

Noting that 14 percent of teachers stop teaching after their first year and almost 50 percent leave the profession within five years, Miller said the federal government must do a better job at recruiting, retaining, and rewarding excellent teachers and leaders. He also stressed the need to ensure that teacher talent is distributed equally within school districts.

“In almost every school district across the country, the schools and students most in need of funding often get the fewest resources,” Miller said. “Children in the highest poverty and high minority schools are assigned to teachers without strong backgrounds in their subject matter at twice the rate as children in wealthier schools.”

Miller blamed these disparities in resources and quality teachers for the “embarrassing and persistent achievement gap in this country,” which he said pose a “real threat” to our economic recovery and our global competitiveness—specifically when students drop out of school. “High school dropouts can have an enormous economic impact on our nation as a whole,” Miller said. “Altogether, dropouts from the Class of 2008 will cost this country nearly \$319 billion wages over their lifetimes.”

To help attract and retain bright teaching talent, Miller said teachers need to be treated like professionals, with the respect, recognition, and resources needed to do their jobs. He called for rewards for teachers whose students make significant gains in the classroom, but stressed that teachers must have a seat at the table when those reforms are considered. “If we’re serious about closing the achievement gap, about ending the high school dropout crisis, about regaining our global competitiveness in the world, then we have to be serious about supporting teachers,” Miller said.

In his opening statement, [Representative Mike Castle, senior Republican on the Education and Labor Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education](#), noted that Republicans have championed programs, such as the Teacher Incentive Fund, to improve teacher effectiveness in the classroom and reward effective teachers. He warned against “one-size-fits-all” federal solutions to ensure effective teachers are in every classroom and suggested that Congress can learn from states and local school districts, encourage innovation around the country, and remove harmful barriers at the federal level that stand in the way of student achievement.”

[Watch video from the hearing or read witness testimony.](#)

Alliance “Primer” on Upcoming Congressional Hearing

On May 19, the U.S. House Education and Labor Committee will hold another hearing in its series on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The hearing will explore best practices and research on proven models that work to turn around chronically underperforming schools in communities across the country. More information on the hearing, including a list of witnesses, is available at <http://edlabor.house.gov/hearings/2010/05/research-and-best-practices-on.shtml>.

The Alliance for Excellent Education has created a “primer” for this hearing that provides useful facts, flaws in current law, and recommendations on how to improve the current federal approach to tackling chronically underperforming schools. The primer, as well as primers on past congressional hearings on ESEA reauthorization is available at http://www.all4ed.org/publication_materials/ESEAHearingPrimers.



STATE OF METROPOLITAN AMERICA: New Report Suggests More Young Adults Are College-Bound Due to Struggling Local Economies

According to a new report from the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program, ninety-one of the one hundred largest U.S. metropolitan areas experienced a significant increase in the share of young adults enrolled in higher education between 2000 and 2008. Some of the most considerable increases occurred in the older, industrial metro areas of the Northwest and Midwest, which, according to the *State of Metropolitan America: On the Front Lines of Demographic Transformation*, could indicate that young people in these struggling economies are becoming increasingly aware of the need for a postsecondary degree to succeed in the labor market.

The *State of Metropolitan America* looks at the major demographic milestones that America has experienced over the last decade. Through the context of this evolving landscape, the report discusses several topical areas, including population and migration, race and ethnicity, immigration, age, households and families, educational attainment, work, income and poverty, and commuting.

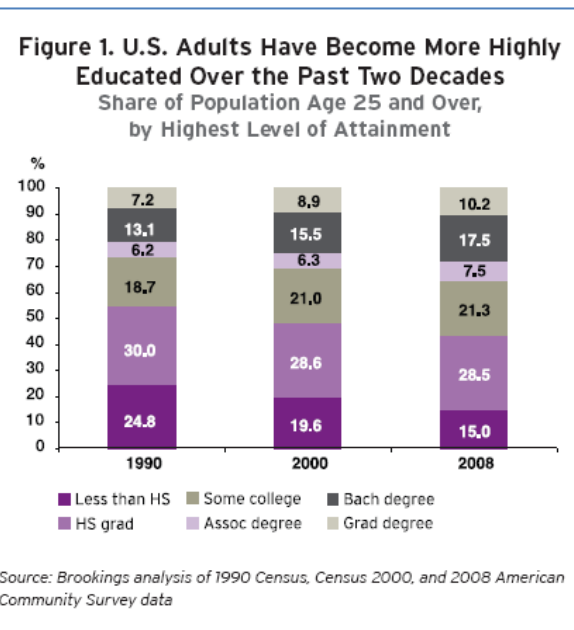
“All of these trends, and this is our particular lens, are accentuated in the nation’s hundred largest metropolitan areas,” said **Alan Berube, writer of the report’s educational attainment section and senior fellow and research director at the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program.**

“The trends are more intense, at a greater scale, at a greater pace, because of who lives in these places and the changes that these places are undergoing as well. So if we want to know where the nation is heading over the next ten, twenty years we can look to our metropolitan areas today.”

The study reveals that nationally, 41 percent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds were enrolled in higher education in 2008, up from 34 percent in 2000. In some areas throughout New England and upstate New York, more than half of young adults were enrolled in 2008. Rapid gains were also particularly notable in a number of older industrial metro areas in the Great Lakes region including Detroit, Toledo, Cleveland, and St. Louis, where enrollment numbers jumped 10 percentage points or more. The report postulates that this could be a result of the loss of manufacturing jobs in these areas.

At the same time, the report finds that although Americans are growing more educated as a whole, younger Americans are not making the same level of progress as older Americans. The report suggests that this development could threaten continued upward progress in U.S. living standards.

As shown in the chart to the right, the overall share of U.S. adults with a four-year college degree increased from 24.4 percent to 28 percent



between 2000 and 2008. However, in 2008, a lesser share (29 percent) of twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds held a four-year degree than those ages thirty-five to forty-four (31 percent). This represents a reversal from the trend in 2000 when twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds had a slightly higher (28 percent) rate of bachelor's degree attainment than those ages thirty-five to forty-four (26 percent). It is important to note that these gains and losses have also varied widely across different regions of the United States.

At the a secondary school level, the share of adults with at least a high school diploma rose from 75 percent in 1990 to 85 percent in 2008. However, striking differences exist between racial and ethnic groups across the country. For example, in 2008 only 61 percent of Hispanic adults had a high school diploma compared to 90 percent of white adults and 80 percent of black adults. For Hispanics, this represents an 8 percentage point increase in high school diploma attainment rate since 2000; however, in postsecondary attainment rates there has only been a marginal increase (15.6 percent in 2000 to 16.6 percent in 2008).

Across the nation's one hundred largest metropolitan areas, the educational attainment gap by race and ethnicity is severe. "We are getting more educated but in a very uneven way that's leaving some of our racial and ethnic minorities behind," said Berube. Overall, 50 percent of Asian adults and 36 percent of white adults possess college degrees versus 20 percent of blacks and 14 percent of Hispanics. The report points out that in some western metro areas, African Americans register higher degree-earning rates as is the case for Latinos in Midwest, Northeast, and Florida areas.

The report also shows that metro areas such as Boston, New York, San Diego, and San Francisco—areas already known for being highly educated—are getting even smarter and at a rate faster than other regions in the United States. These cities ranked among the top gainers of college graduates in the 2000s. The top ranked highly educated metro area, Washington, DC, stood about thirty-four percentage points above the lowest ranked area, Bakersfield, California. This difference in rankings has shifted from where it was in 1990 when the highest ranked city stood only twenty-six percentage points above the lowest ranked city.

To read more about the *State of Metropolitan America: On the Front Lines of Demographic Transformation* visit http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2010/0509_metro_america.aspx.

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