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Public Education Policy And Progress



DIVIDED WE STALL?: Prospects for Education Reform Unclear After Republicans Take Control in the House of Representatives, Gain Ground in Senate

As the smoke clears from an election day battle that left Democrats bruised and beaten, it is evident that Republicans will pick up at least sixty seats—[and possibly as many as sixty-five](#)—to claim control of the U.S. House of Representatives. In the U.S. Senate, Republicans gained six seats, but fell short of capturing the majority.¹ What remains unclear is whether a divided Congress—a Republican-controlled House and a Democrat-controlled Senate—can work with President Obama to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as No Child Left Behind.

Education reformers who are “bullish” on education reform in 2011 point out that in 2002—the last time ESEA was reauthorized—control of Congress was similarly split, with Democrats narrowly controlling the Senate and Republicans controlling the House. At the same time, there was a president in the White House, George W. Bush, who was strongly pushing for education reform. That appears to be the case again this time with President Obama.

“This is a top, top priority for the president,” **Melody Barnes, director of the White House Domestic Policy Council**, told the *Washington Post*. “This is and has been a bipartisan issue. We think it transcends ideology.”

In the November 3 [article](#), **Washington Post Staff Writer Nick Anderson** writes that education is one major domestic issue that “seems ripe for deal making” if President Obama is seeking common ground with Republicans in the next Congress. Anderson notes that key Republican lawmakers “appear receptive” to the president’s ideas on education reform because they include teacher performance pay, charter schools, and other innovations that Republicans could support.

Some political observers believe that the Republican takeover of the House of Representatives could make education reform more likely given the polarization around other issues and the pressure to accomplish something prior to the next elections. As evidence of how divided government can encourage compromise, they point to the role that welfare reform played after Republicans took control of the House after the 1994 elections. Indeed, the current political environment—historic Republican gains in the House and a highly partisan atmosphere—looks remarkably similar to 1994. Back then, most thought nothing would get done and, in fact, the federal government was actually shut down on two different occasions. However, President

¹ Democrats will control fifty-three seats in the U.S. Senate, which includes two Independent senators who are aligned with Democrats. Republicans will control forty-seven seats.

Clinton was able to come to an agreement on welfare reform with House Speaker Newt Gingrich and the Republican majority in Congress.

During a [November 4 webinar](#) on the impact of the mid-term elections on education reform efforts, **Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise**, who was a sitting member of Congress in 1994, said that education reform could be the welfare reform of 2011. “Both parties desperately needed to be perceived as working together,” Wise said. “And this is one area where they can do it.”

Stuart Rothenberg, editor and publisher of the *Rothenberg Political Report*, who also appeared on the November 4 webinar panel, agreed with Wise. “Republicans are going to want some successes,” he said. “They’re going to understand that if they at least appear to be doing something—making peoples’ lives better—it will help how they’re evaluated. The White House will absolutely need successes ... so I think that there’s at least some hope that an area like education ... there’s a general sense that maybe this is an area in which we can make progress.”

Representative Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ), cochair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus and member of the House Education and Labor Committee, also senses that education reform could be Obama’s welfare reform, but he does not necessarily see that connection as a positive development. “That’s my sense and also my concern, to be quite honest,” Grijalva told a daily TV/Radio program, [Democracy Now!](#), as reported by the [Huffington Post](#). “We had an opportunity to reauthorize elementary and secondary education. We didn’t do that. Now we go back to a session in which the Republicans are going to control the Education and Labor Committee. I see [education] as a place where people are going to look for a common agenda between Republicans and the White House, but I also see it, as it could be for public education, a very, very slippery slope. We have to be very cautious and very protective of public education as one of the agenda items.”

Those less positive about the prospects of education reform in 2011 point out that welfare reform was not enacted until August of 1996—nearly two years after Republicans took control of the House of Representatives. Even those bullish on education reform agree that it cannot wait that long. Wise said that ESEA reauthorization “had to be done in 2011 and probably before the August recess” because of the looming presidential election. If ESEA is not reauthorized in 2011, Wise thought that it could take several more years.

Jack Jennings, president of the Center on Education Policy, also believes that the presidential election could negatively impact ESEA reauthorization. As the *Washington Post* reports, “Jennings [thinks] we’re headed for deadlock for a couple years” and he predicts the Republicans’ drive to unseat Obama in 2012 will trump all else when Republican lawmakers decide whether to compromise with the president. “They don’t want to give him any victories on anything,” Jennings told the *Post*. “I can’t see them wanting to give him a victory on education.”

Another faction that could play a role is the Tea Party. After seeing some of their more moderate colleagues knocked off in primary contests earlier this year, incumbent Republicans in the House could feel pressure to move more to the right and compromise with the president less in order to prevent primary challenges from Tea Partiers in 2012.

The wildcard in this legislative poker game could be **Representative John Boehner (R-OH)**, the presumed House Speaker-to-be. In the [November 4 installment of his “School of Thought” education column for Time.com](#), **Andrew J. Rotherham, cofounder and partner at Bellwether Education Partners**, calls Boehner a “seasoned negotiator” who was one of the “Big Four,” along with **Senator Judd Gregg (R-NH)**, former **Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA)**, and **Representative George Miller (D-CA)**, who helped craft what became the No Child Left Behind Act the last time ESEA was reauthorized. At the same time however, Rotherham notes that Boehner’s views about education “matter less than the question of what he can accomplish given the fractious caucus he will be leading.”

Rotherham points out that many of the record class of eighty-four newly elected Republican members of Congress are set on cutting spending—in fact, Republicans’ [A Pledge to America](#), which outlines their priorities for 2011, includes \$100 billion in spending cuts—which, he says, means that big infusions of cash will not be available to “help grease the wheels for political deals around education reform.”

However, as the *Washington Post* article points out, *A Pledge to America* omitted any mention of the word education. “As a result,” it reads, “the rhetorical temperature on education is cooler than on taxes, spending, health care, energy, and other topics on which emboldened Republicans are sure to confront the president.”

Writing for [Politico in another day-after-Election-Day article](#), **Reporter Kendra Marr** writes that U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan “believes that education reform can be the great bipartisan issue, uniting the two feuding parties.” She quotes Duncan who says, “Am I hopeful? Absolutely. Am I optimistic? Yes. Do I think it’s the right thing to do for children, for the country? Absolutely.”

During his [post-election press conference on November 3](#), President Obama echoed that sentiment. “I think everybody in this country thinks that we’ve got to make sure our kids are equipped in terms of their education, their science background, their math backgrounds, to compete in this new global economy,” he said. “And that’s going to be an area where I think there’s potential common ground.”

Save the Date: Results from the *Nation’s Report Card* in Reading and Math for Twelfth Graders to be Released November 18

Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the *Nation’s Report Card*, in reading and mathematics for Grade 12 will be released on Thursday, November 18. The report, which is the nation’s only nationally representative and continuing measure of twelfth-grade student achievement will include results for the nation and the first-ever state-level data from eleven pilot states.

The event will begin at 10:00 a.m. at the Community College of the District of Columbia at 801 North Capitol Street, NW, in Washington, DC. A live webcast of the event, as well as the complete report, will be available online at <http://nationsreportcard.gov> on November 18 at 10:00 a.m., EST.



A CALL FOR CHANGE: New Report Finds that, from Cradle to Career, Black Males Fall Behind

Only 9 percent of black male eighth graders are proficient in reading, compared to 33 percent of white male eighth graders nationwide, according to a new report from the Council of the Great City Schools (Council). *A Call for Change: The Social and Educational Factors Contributing to the Outcomes of Black Males in Urban Schools* documents the challenges that black children face from an early age through adulthood in obtaining an adequate education and calls the achievement gap between black males and their white peers “a national catastrophe.”

The report examines student achievement levels as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In fourth grade, only 12 percent of black males are proficient in reading, compared to 38 percent of white males nationwide. The results were very similar for fourth- and eighth-grade math proficiency. In large cities, black students in grades four and eight scored significantly lower than Hispanic students; however, both of these student groups scored lower than white students.

According to the study, poverty does not explain the differences because the data shows that black males ineligible for free or reduced-price lunch have reading and math skills equal or lower to white males who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Additionally, black males without disabilities performed no better than white males with disabilities.

“The issues that emerge from the data are both moral and economic, calling into question the nation’s ability to harness all of its talent to maintain a leadership footing in the world,” says **Council Executive Director and Report Coauthor Michael Casserly**. “How can you narrow or close the country’s black-white achievement gap when African American males are not getting the attention and support they need to succeed?”

In addition to examining student achievement levels, the report looks at the crisis through the lens of readiness to learn. From the very outset, black children are at a disadvantage, compared to their white peers. Black mothers have infant mortality rates twice as high as white mothers, and black children are more likely to be without health insurance, live in a single-parent household, live in a household where a parent is unemployed, and live in poverty. Educational attainment data shows that in 2008, one third of black children had a parent with a high school diploma, 24 percent had a parent with at least some college experience, and less than 15 percent had a parent with a bachelor’s degree.

Looking at 2008 high school graduation rates, *A Call for Change* reports that 9 percent of black males dropped out of high school, compared to almost half as many (5 percent) white male students. Compared to white students, black students were less likely to graduate high school on time or within a four-year period. On college entrance exams, such as the SAT and ACT, the average scores of black students were below those of white students. And while three out of ten black males enrolled in four-year institutions in 2009, four out of ten white males did.

The report finds that these trends continue through the college years, with black students less likely than their white peers to participate in academic clubs, more likely to be suspended from school, and more likely to be retained in grades. In 2001, college graduation rates for white males were at least 50 percent higher than those of black males with about 15 percent of black

males graduating in four years, compared to 33 percent of white males. In 2008, black males ages eighteen and over accounted for 5 percent of the total college student population and 36 percent of the total prison population. The report also finds that black males, as compared to their white counterparts, are more likely to be unemployed and earn lower incomes.

In the preface of the report, the Council readily admits that “much of this story has been told before,” but by compiling this data in one place, the organization hopes to sound a new alarm and coordinate national attention to correct the situation.

“The nation’s urban public schools see this issue as national in scale but are eager to take the lead on addressing these challenges because of the large numbers of black male young people who live and attend schools in our major cities,” said Casserly. “We are not interested in reflecting and perpetuating society’s larger inequities; instead, we are committed to overcoming them.”

The Council calls for Congress to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and establish a program and financial aid for closing the achievement gap. The report also recommends the following: build a nationwide network of support to mentor black young people and their families; expand the number of black male counselors in the nation’s urban schools; encourage local, state, and national educators to disaggregate academic and nonacademic data by gender and race or ethnicity; and work with higher education institutes to ensure academic and social support for black males in higher education.

Read the full report at <http://bit.ly/c7PM7o>.



U.S. MATH PERFORMANCE IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE: U.S. Students with Advanced Math Skills Lag Behind International High-Achieving Peers

A new report finds that 6 percent of U.S. public and private school students tested at the advanced level in eighth-grade mathematics, compared to 28 percent of students in Taiwan and at least 20 percent of students in Finland, Hong Kong, and Korea. The report, *U.S. Math Performance in Global Perspective: How Well Does Each State Do at Producing High-Achieving Students?*, compares the percentage of U.S. students who have advanced math skills in each of the fifty states and in ten urban districts to the percentages of similarly high achievers in fifty-six other countries.

In conducting the study, the authors use test results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) to compare individual U.S. state performances with performances by other countries. The authors explain their focus on math by noting that it is “particularly well suited” to rigorous comparisons across countries and cultures. “There is a fairly clear international consensus on the math concepts and techniques that need to be mastered and on the order in which those concepts should be introduced into the curriculum,” the report reads.

The report finds that overall the United States ranks thirty-first out of fifty-six countries, trailing most of the world’s leading industrialized nations. In addition to the four countries listed above, twelve other countries have at least twice the percentage of highly accomplished students as the

United States: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Germany, Japan, Liechtenstein, Macao, Netherlands, New Zealand, and Switzerland.

The study is presented by [Education Next](#) and [Harvard University's Program on Education Policy and Governance](#). It is coauthored by **Eric Hanushek, the Paul and Jean Hanna senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution; Paul Peterson, editor-in-chief for Education Next, the Henry Lee Shattuck professor of government at Harvard, and director of Harvard's Program on Education Policy and Governance; and Ludger Woessmann, professor of economics at the University of Munich, head of the department of human capital and innovation at Ifo Institute for Economic Research, and coordinator of the European Expert Network on the Economics of Education (EENEE).**

The report finds that the percentages of high-performing math students vary widely from state to state—from a high of 11.4 percent in Massachusetts to a low of 1.3 percent in Mississippi. No state fairs very well when compared internationally. In fact, most states rank alongside developing countries such as Latvia, Portugal, Russia, and Turkey. Massachusetts, the highest-performing state, is on par with countries such as Denmark, France, and Germany, but it still trails fourteen other countries. The next four highest-performing states are Minnesota (10.8 percent), Vermont (8.8 percent), New Jersey (8.7 percent), and Washington (8.7 percent), which fall into the same group as Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, among others.

At the other end of the spectrum, Mississippi is joined by New Mexico and West Virginia as the lowest-ranking states (both with 1.4 percent of students), making their performances comparable to that of countries such as Bulgaria and Turkey. Noting that California is known for its Silicon Valley, which boasts excellence in high-tech innovation and development, the report points out that the state had only 4.5 percent of students performing at a high level making it comparable to countries such as Israel, Italy, Portugal, and Turkey.

“Public discourse has tended to focus on the need to address low achievement, particularly among disadvantaged students, and bring everyone up to a minimum level of proficiency,” said Peterson. “As great as this need may be, there is no less need to lift more students, no matter their socioeconomic background, to high levels of educational accomplishment.”

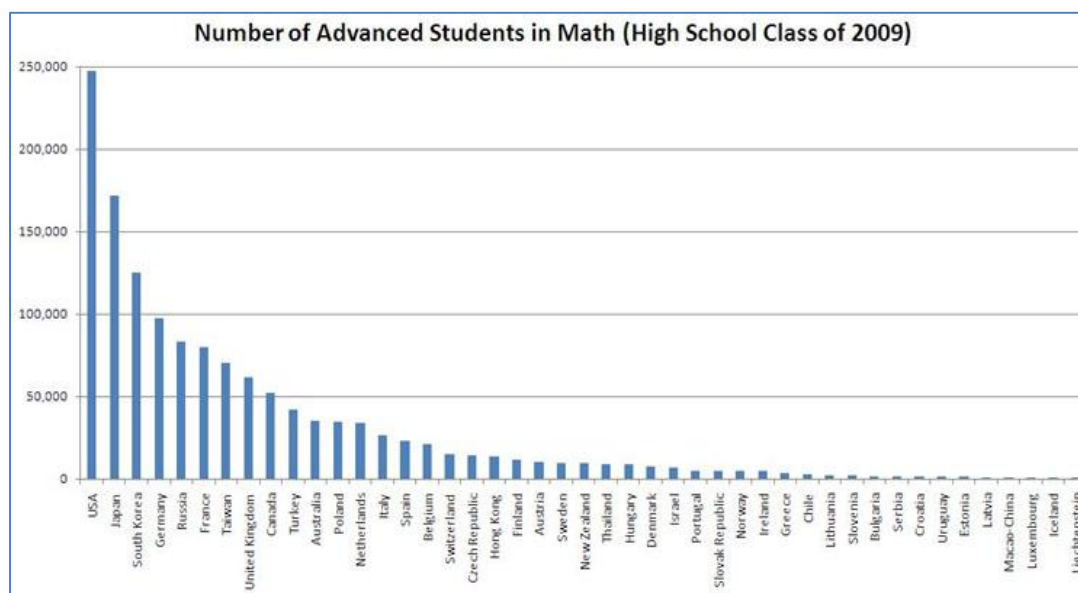
The study was partly conducted to test what Hanushek describes as the “diversity excuse” in a recent [article](#) in the *Atlantic*. Talking to *Atlantic* Reporter **Amanda Ripley**, he says, “In the litany of excuses, one explanation is always, ‘We’re a very heterogeneous society—all these immigrants are dragging us down. But *our* kids are doing fine.’”

To challenge this reasoning, the study compares the percentage of white American students in the Class of 2009 who scored at the advanced math level with the percentages of all students with high skills, regardless of race or ethnicity, from other countries. The results show that in twenty-four countries, the percentage of highly accomplished students from all backgrounds exceeds the 8 percent of white students in the United States who perform at an advanced level. This pattern occurs across most states with only seven states having 10 percent or more of their white students who perform at an advanced level. In California, for example, 7.2 percent of white students are high achieving—about the same percentage as all students in Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia.

U.S. Math Performance in Global Perspective also explores the theory that American schools help students reach levels of high accomplishment if parents are providing the necessary support. When comparing U.S. children from educated families to all children in other countries, the study finds that sixteen countries still outrank the United States. Of all U.S. Class of 2009 students with parents who graduated from college, only 10.3 percent perform at the advanced level, compared to nearly 30 percent of all Taiwanese children, regardless of their parents' educational attainment.

Lastly, the report examines the percentages of students scoring at advanced levels in urban districts and finds that Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Washington, DC have lower percentages of students at this level than do Bulgaria and Uruguay. Consequently, these school districts' ability to lift student performance to the highest levels is roughly equivalent to the ability of schools in Latin America.

In a November 10 [post on Fordham Institute's Flypaper blog](#), **Mike Petrilli, executive vice president at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and executive editor at *Education Next***, examines how the United States continues to be a global leader, especially in high-tech fields, while its top students perform poorly by international comparisons. Reasoning that the sheer size of the United States is a huge advantage compared to smaller countries such as Taiwan and Hong Kong, Petrilli multiplies the percentages from the study by the student population of each country and finds that the picture for the United States “appears much better—and much brighter,” as demonstrated in the graph below.



Download *U.S. Math Performance in Global Perspective* at <http://bit.ly/c4hxWf>.

Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events in Washington, DC and around the country. The format makes information on federal education policy accessible to everyone from elected officials and policymakers to parents and community leaders. The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization that works to improve national and federal policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century. For more information about the Alliance, visit <http://www.all4ed.org>.