



# StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## ESEA ON THE WAY?: Harkin Eyes Next Month for Possible Committee Action on ESEA Reauthorization

Last week, **Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA)** said that he intends to mark up legislation next month that would reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Harkin has set a goal of having the legislation reach the Senate floor in late June or July, but acknowledged that finding a replacement for **Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens**, [who announced that he will retire this summer](#), could cause the timeline to slip.

In the weeks since the Obama administration released its [blueprint for revising ESEA](#) on March 13, the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee and the House Education and Labor Committee have held multiple hearings on ESEA reauthorization.

Last week alone, the Senate HELP Committee held two hearings on ESEA reauthorization. On April 13, the committee heard testimony from experts on turning around chronically underperforming schools—a topic that Harkin referred to in his opening statement as “one of the great moral, economic, and civil rights imperatives of our day.”

The hearing on school turnaround featured testimony from **Joel Klein, chancellor of New York City Public Schools**, who explained New York City’s approach to school turnaround and shared what he saw as shortcomings in NCLB, including its “focus on absolute achievement instead of growth,” which he said places many schools in the category of “failing” even if students made significant gains. “Even after six years of missing Annual Yearly Progress—years during which students’ lives and futures are on the line—NCLB is vague about what types of turnaround strategies are necessary to achieve fundamental change,” Klein said.

Also testifying at the hearing was **Robert Balfanz, director of the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University**, who discussed the approximately two thousand high schools in the nation in which graduation is not the norm and the middle schools linked to these high schools. (For additional information on these high schools, see the article on the new Alliance for Excellent Education brief, “Prioritizing the Nation’s Lowest-Performing High Schools,” listed below.)



Harkin delivers his opening statement at the April 13 hearing on school turnaround. (Click on the image to watch video of the hearing.)

“[In these middle schools], at least half of eventual dropouts begin the process of disengaging from school, and achievement gaps become achievement chasms,” Balfanz said. “Thus, by the time they get to high school, many students already have one foot out the door, as witnessed by their declining attendance, poor behavior, and course failure during the middle grades. As a result, high schools face an intense educational challenge they were not designed to meet.”

Balfanz added that if each of the five thousand high schools with graduation rates below the current national average of about 75 percent were to increase their rates by, on average, two percentage points per year for ten years, the national graduation rate would hit 90 percent. “This is an attainable goal and should become the minimum progress viewed as acceptable,” he said.

The hearing also featured testimony from **Beverly Donohue, vice president of policy and research at New Visions for Public Schools in New York City, Timothy Mitchell, superintendent of Chamberlain School District 7-1 in Chamberlain, South Dakota, and Marco Petruzzi, chief executive officer of Green Dot Public Schools in Los Angeles, California.** ([Access video and witness testimony from the April 13 hearing.](#))

The second Senate HELP Committee hearing, held on April 15, focused on the role that teachers and principals play in the nation’s public schools. Specifically, the committee focused on how ESEA reauthorization could help schools better attract and retain highly qualified teachers and leaders, increase their effectiveness as practitioners, and evaluate the skills and strategies that lead to student achievement. ([Access video and witness testimony from the April 15 hearing.](#))

The Senate HELP Committee will hold additional hearings on [meeting the needs of the whole student](#) (April 22), [standards and assessments](#) (April 28), [meeting the needs of special populations](#) (April 29), and [high schools](#) (May 4).

For its part, the House Education and Labor Committee held a hearing on April 14 to examine how the use of data systems in schools across the country can help improve education outcomes. In his opening statement, **House Education and Labor Committee Chairman George Miller (D-CA)** said it is “unacceptable that education is the only major enterprise in this country that, on the whole, doesn’t use data as to make decisions.” He added that teachers, parents, school administrators and states “need access to real-time data to know exactly how students are faring in school.”

The hearing featured testimony from several data experts including **Richard J. Wenning, associate commissioner of the Colorado Department of Education**, who explained how Colorado uses student performance data to improve accountability for student growth, better inform school improvement efforts, and more clearly communicate with the public, and **Katie Hartley, a teacher and value-added data specialist for Miami East Local Schools in Miami County, Ohio**, who discussed how she uses value-added and achievement data in her classroom and with other groups of teachers to make decisions about curriculum and instruction. ([Access video and witness testimony from the April 14 hearing.](#))

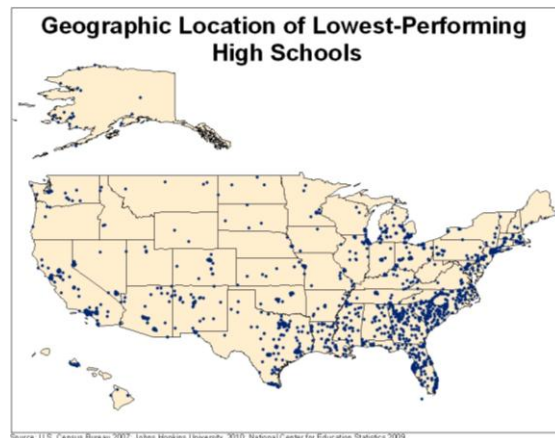


## “PRIORITIZING THE NATION’S LOWEST-PERFORMING HIGH SCHOOLS”: New Alliance Brief Profiles Lowest-Performing Schools, Calls for Federal Action

A new brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education calls on Congress to address the approximately two thousand high schools that account for nearly half of the nation’s dropouts. According to the brief, “Prioritizing the Nation’s Lowest-Performing High Schools,” these schools exist in every state and in 80 percent of congressional districts.

“When emergency medical personnel arrive at an accident scene, they immediately deliver treatment to the most severely injured, said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Similarly, the nation must focus its attention on the lowest-performing schools with the largest number of ‘victims’ in the national dropout crisis. The fact that these schools are so widespread and contribute so greatly to the national dropout crisis dictates making them an essential focus of any federal effort to improve the graduation rate.”

In the nation’s lowest-performing high schools, sometimes known as “dropout factories,” graduation rates routinely fall below 60 percent. Over half of these schools have student bodies larger than one thousand, but others are small- or medium-sized schools. And contrary to a common misconception, not all of the nation’s lowest-performing high schools are located in urban areas; half are located outside city limits suburbs, small towns, and rural areas.



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In an era of diminishing financial resources, it makes good economic sense to target the nation’s lowest-performing high schools and focus attention, commitment, and resources on improving them, the brief argues. Directing strategic efforts to turn around these schools could significantly reduce the nation’s dropout rate.

The [Graduation Promise Act](#) (GPA), currently pending before Congress, would authorize \$2.5 billion in new funding to ensure that high schools with the greatest challenges receive the support they need to implement research-based interventions. Additionally, it would strengthen a state’s ability to identify and target the level of reform and resources necessary to improve and turn around the nation’s lowest-performing high schools, while ensuring transparency and accountability.

“As the Congress works to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act this year, it should include the Graduation Promise Act, which would provide states and school districts with the resources to implement effective, research-based reforms tailored to the specific needs of the nation’s lowest-performing schools and the students who attend them,” Wise said.

The complete brief, which includes a table outlining the number of lowest-performing high schools and the percentages of students who attend them for each state, is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/PrioritizingLowestPerformingSchools.pdf>.



## **WRITING TO READ: New Report Finds that Writing Can Be Powerful Driver for Improving Reading Skills**

Although reading and writing have become essential skills for almost every job, the majority of students do not read or write well enough to meet grade-level demands. A new report from Carnegie Corporation of New York and published by the Alliance for Excellent Education finds that while the two skills are closely connected, writing is an often-overlooked tool for improving reading skills and content learning. *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading* identifies three core instructional practices that have been effective in improving student reading.

“As the [recent findings from \*The Nation’s Report Card in reading\*](#) demonstrate, nearly 70 percent of the nation’s eighth graders fail to read at a proficient level,” said Alliance President Bob Wise. “Poor reading and writing skills not only threaten the well-being of individual Americans, but the country as a whole. Ensuring that adolescents become skilled readers and writers is not merely an option for America—it is an absolute necessity. As *Writing to Read* demonstrates, instruction in writing not only improves how well students write, but it also enhances students’ ability to read a text accurately, fluently, and comprehensively.”

*Writing to Read* is part of a series of Carnegie Corporation of New York-funded reports intended to reengineer literacy instruction across the curriculum to drive student achievement. The initial report, [Time to Act: An Agenda for Advancing Adolescent Literacy for College and Career Readiness](#), and corresponding reports were published in September 2009. *Writing to Read* is an extension of this work and provides practitioners with research-supported information about how writing improves reading while making the case for researchers and policymakers to place greater emphasis on writing instruction as an integral part of school curriculum.

“In an age overwhelmed by information, the ability to read, comprehend, and write—in other words, to organize information into *knowledge*—must be viewed as tantamount to a survival skill,” said **Vartan Gregorian, president of Carnegie Corporation of New York**. “As Americans, we must keep our democracy and our society from being divided not only between rich and poor, but also between those who have access to information and knowledge, and thus, to power—the power of enlightenment, the power of self-improvement and self-assertion, the power to achieve upward mobility, and the power over their own lives and their families’ ability to thrive and succeed—and those who do not.”

The three closely related instructional practices that *Writing to Read* identifies as being effective in improving students reading are:

- **Have students write about the texts they read.** Writing about a text enhances comprehension because it provides students with a tool to visibly and permanently

record, connect, analyze, personalize, and manipulate key ideas in text. Students' comprehension of science, social studies, and language arts is improved specifically when they respond to a text in writing; write summaries of a text; write notes about a text; and answer questions about a text in writing, or create and answer written questions about a text.

- **Teach students the writing skills and processes that go into creating text.** Students' reading skills and comprehension are improved by learning the skills and processes that go into creating text specifically when teachers teach the process of writing, text structures for writing, paragraph or sentence construction skills; teach spelling and sentence construction skills; and teach spelling skills.
- **Increase how much students write.** Students' reading comprehension is improved by having them increase how often they produce their own text. The process of creating a text prompts students to be more thoughtful and engaged when reading text produced by others. The act of writing also teaches students about the importance of stating assumptions and premises clearly and observing the rules of logic. Students also benefit from using experience and knowledge to create a text as well as building relationships among words, sentences, and paragraphs.

“*Writing to Read* explains how building and strengthening writing skills can form a pathway to successful reading practices,” said Wise. “When students are required to write about what they learn, they are challenged to digest and organize the information in meaningful ways that enables them to successfully communicate the information to a second party. By forming these connections, students are better equipped to comprehend material as well as approach reading with a higher level of understanding and appreciation.”

The report carefully notes that writing practices cannot take the place of effective reading practices and calls for writing to complement reading instruction, stating that each type of practice supports and strengthens the other. With lower-achieving students, an important key to success is providing ongoing practice and explicit instruction.

*Writing to Read*, commissioned by Carnegie Corporation of New York and authored by **Steve Graham and Michael Hebert (both from Vanderbilt University)**, builds on the ideas presented in a 2006 Alliance report, [Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High School Literacy](#). In both publications, a form of research called meta-analysis is used to collect, categorize, and examine experimental and quasi-experimental data. *Writing to Read* marks the first meta-analysis examining the effects of different writing practices on students' reading performance.

*Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading* is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/WritingToRead.pdf> and [www.carnegie.org/literacy](http://www.carnegie.org/literacy).



**BREAKING THE CYCLE: New Report from Michigan State University Finds that Middle School Math Teachers Are Receiving Weak Training**

Middle school math teachers are unprepared to teach students at a level considered competitive internationally, according to a new report from the Teacher Education Study in Mathematics (TEDS-M), a project based out of Michigan State University. *Breaking the Cycle: An International Comparison of U.S. Mathematics Teacher Preparation* finds that neither prospective elementary nor middle school math teachers are as prepared to teach students as their international counterparts, but notes that preparation for U.S. middle school math teachers is “much more disconcerting” than preparation for elementary teachers.

“We must break the cycle in which we find ourselves,” said **William Schmidt, University Distinguished Professor of education and one of the contributors to the report.** “A weak K–12 mathematics curriculum in the U.S., taught by teachers with an inadequate mathematics background, produces high school graduates who are at a disadvantage. When some of these students become future teachers and are not given a strong background in mathematics during teacher preparation, the cycle continues.”

The report assessed teachers near the end of their program in terms of both their knowledge of mathematics as well as their knowledge of how to teach mathematics, also known as pedagogical knowledge. As shown in the chart to the right, the performance of U.S. middle school math teachers placed them behind Taiwan, the Russian Federation, Singapore, Poland, Switzerland, and Germany although the differences for Switzerland and Germany were not statistically significant.

The preparation of elementary teachers to teach mathematics was comparatively a bit better as the United States found itself in the middle of the distribution with other countries such as the Russian Federation, Germany, and Norway but behind Switzerland, Taiwan, and Singapore.

Overall Performance in Mathematics Content Knowledge in Middle School		
Country	Mn	(se)
Taiwan	667	(3.9)
Russian Federation	594	(12.8)
Singapore	570	(2.8)
Poland	540	(3.1)
Switzerland	531	(3.7)
Germany	519	(3.6)
United States-Private	512	(16.3)
United States-Public	505	(9.7)
Malaysia	493	(2.4)
Thailand	479	(1.6)
Oman	472	(2.4)
Norway	444	(2.3)
Philippines	442	(4.6)
Botswana	441	(5.3)
Georgia	424	(8.9)
Chile	354	(2.5)

Significantly above US-Public  
 Not significantly different from US-Public  
 Significantly below US-Public

The study observes that the performance of future teachers in terms of their mathematics content knowledge at both the elementary and secondary levels closely parallels that of the students they teach. This is further supported by the results of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which shows average achievement at the third- and fourth-grade levels but low achievement at the seventh- and eighth-grade levels as compared to other countries.

The report walks through the different ways that teacher certification is accomplished including elementary programs granting K–8 certification; middle school programs granting 6–8 or 7–9 certification; and secondary programs granting 6–12 or 7–12 certification. The report finds that in terms of mathematical content and pedagogical content knowledge, teachers trained in secondary programs outperformed other teachers by a significant amount, which, according to

the report authors, should raise serious questions about the rules that states mandate for the training of middle school mathematic teachers.

The report also shows an international comparison of how much time teacher preparation programs devote to one of three areas, including the study of formal mathematics, mathematics pedagogy (i.e., how students learn mathematics and how it is best taught), and general pedagogy (i.e., instructional design, classroom management, as well as foundation courses related to schooling). In top-performing countries, 50 percent of the teacher preparation course was spent on the study of mathematics; the other half was allocated to mathematic pedagogy (30 percent) and general pedagogy (20 percent). In contrast, U.S. institutions spent 40 percent of the teacher preparation program on the study of mathematics and 60 percent was split evenly between mathematic and general pedagogy. The report also noted that while nearly all future middle school teachers in the top-achieving countries took courses in linear algebra and basic calculus, only about half of U.S. future teachers took these fundamental courses.

*Breaking the Cycle* also points to the varying levels of mathematic knowledge required for teaching middle school topics within different teacher preparation programs in the United States. For example, the report finds that some of the U.S. teacher preparation programs produced teachers that were at a similar level to how teachers performed in developing countries such as Botswana, but that other U.S. institutions produce teachers who have a knowledge level consistent with the average performance of select institutions in Taiwan.

The report authors also find a mismatch between what teachers know now and what they will be expected to know under the state-led, common core standards movement currently underway. The standards are designed to be internationally competitive and will hold students to higher expectations, which in turn, means that teachers will have to gain a deeper understanding of mathematics and be prepared to teach the challenging curriculum to all students. To address this dilemma, the report provides three recommendations:

- Recruit teachers with stronger math backgrounds.
- Implement more rigorous state certification requirements for math teachers.
- Require more demanding math courses in all teacher preparation programs.

For the study, data was collected over a period of two years from nearly 3,300 future teachers from over eighty public and private colleges and universities within thirty-nine states.

To read the complete report or view related resources, visit <http://www.educ.msu.edu/content/default.asp?contentID=710>.

***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>.