



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



WAIVING GOODBYE TO NCLB?: U.S. Education Secretary Discusses Options to Grant Relief from NCLB's Requirements In Absence of Congressional Action

In a June 10 conference call with reporters and a [June 13 op-ed for *Politico*](#), **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** discussed his options for waiving certain requirements in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) should Congress be unable to finish a reauthorization of the law by this fall. Duncan declined to name specific portions of the law that could be waived, but the [New York Times](#), citing aides to Duncan, reported that the main target would be the requirement that 100 percent of students be proficient in reading and math by 2014. Duncan said that the Obama administration would immediately reach out to governors and other key state leaders to see which provisions of the law they consider the most serious obstacles and determine what kinds of reforms they would accept in exchange for the increased flexibility.

“We’re not going to sit here and do nothing,” Duncan said. “Our first priority is to have Congress rewrite the law. If that doesn’t get done, we have the obligation to provide relief in exchange for reform.”

Congressional leaders responsible for rewriting the law reacted cautiously to Duncan’s remarks. A spokeswoman for **House Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline (R-MN)** said that Kline “remains concerned about any initiative that would allow the secretary to pick winners and losers in the nation’s education system. She told the *New York Times* that Kline supports “providing states and school districts with enhanced flexibility, believing a more streamlined federal role in education combined with reduced regulatory burdens would encourage greater innovation and higher academic achievement.”

In a statement, **Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA)** said, “The best way to fix the problems in existing law is to pass a better one. We are making good progress toward introducing a bill that will advance that goal. Given the bipartisan commitment in Congress to fixing No Child Left Behind, it seems premature at this point to take steps outside the legislative process that would address NCLB’s problems in a temporary and piecemeal way.”

Duncan underscored that he was not issuing an ultimatum to Congress by making his announcement. Instead, he said he is “more optimistic” about the progress on reauthorization in the last few weeks than he has ever been, and added that providing temporary relief to states could make it easier for Congress to work on a comprehensive bill.

“If we do this, it doesn’t necessarily preclude Congress from continuing to act,” Duncan said. “The prospect of doing nothing is what we’re fighting against.” Duncan added that he wanted to see “real action” in the fall. “It’ll either come from Congress or from us. It’s got to happen in real-people time, not Washington time. Principals, superintendents, and children cannot wait forever for the legislative process to work itself out. As it exists now, No Child Left Behind is creating a slow-motion train wreck for children, parents, and teachers.”



DIPLOMAS COUNT 2011: Report Pegs National High School Graduation Rate at 71.7 Percent, Highest Since 1980s

At 71.7 percent, the national high school graduation rate has reached its highest point since the 1980s, according to a new report from *Education Week* and the Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center. The report finds that the graduation rate increased nearly 3 percentage points from 2007 to 2008, the most recent year for which data is available, after declines in the previous two years. As a result, the nation’s public schools will generate about 145,000 fewer dropouts than the previous year. Even with this recent improvement, however, more than 1.2 million students—about 6,400 every day—leave high school without a diploma every year, the report finds.

“Just as Americans have been following the stock market and employment reports for signs of an economic turnaround, education watchers have been on the lookout for improving graduation rates for the better part of a decade,” said **Christopher B. Swanson, vice president of Editorial Projects in Education, the nonprofit organization that publishes *Education Week***. “It looks like we are finally seeing strong signs of a broad-based educational recovery, which we hope will gain further momentum.”

The report, *Diplomas Count 2011: Beyond High School, Before Bacculaureate—Meaningful Alternatives to a Four-Year Degree*, finds that the nation’s graduation rate increased 6.1 percentage points from 1998 to 2008, including widespread improvements across three-quarters of states and among each major racial and ethnic group.

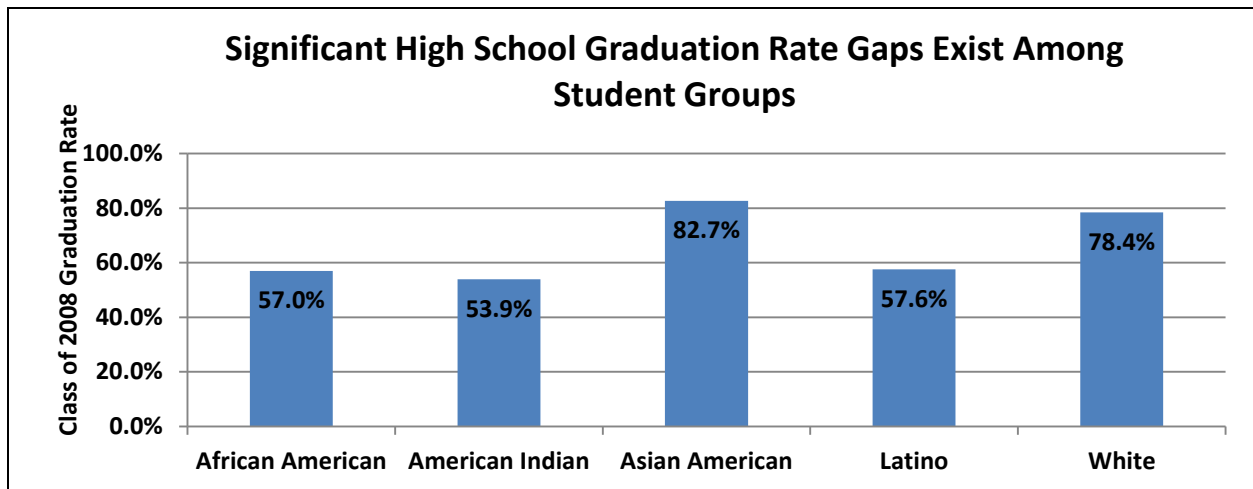
Specifically, thirty-eight states made gains over the last decade, including double-digit percentage-point increases in Florida (+12.4), Kentucky (+10.6 percent), New Jersey (+11.1), New York (+14.1), North Carolina (+15.4), and Tennessee (+20.0). Overall, New Jersey’s graduation rate (86.9 percent) led the nation, while Washington, DC had the lowest graduation rate (43 percent). The five highest and lowest high school graduation rates by state are shown in the table below.

Highest and Lowest State High School Graduation Rates

State	Graduation Rate	State	Graduation Rate
New Jersey	86.9%	Washington, DC	43.0%
Vermont	82.7%	Nevada	44.3%
Wisconsin	81.3%	New Mexico	57.1%
North Dakota	80.2%	South Carolina	58.6%
Iowa	79.6%	Georgia	58.8%

The report also finds that each major racial and ethnic group posted gains of at least 2 percentage points, with African American students showing the most improvement. At the same time, however, graduation rates for white students outpaced those of Native Americans and Latino students, meaning that large gaps in graduation rates continue to exist, the report finds.

As shown in the graph below, Asian American students (82.7 percent) have the highest graduation rate, followed by white students (78.4 percent), Latino students, African Americans, and American Indian students—all with graduation rates less than 60 percent—trail by a significant margin. High school graduation rates for minority males, which consistently fell near the 50 percent mark, continue to be a chief concern. Overall, 74.7 percent of female students earned a diploma, compared to 67.7 percent of male students, the report finds.



Source: Editorial Projects in Education, “Diplomas Count 2011: Beyond High School, Before Baccalaureate—Meaningful Alternatives to a Four-Year Degree”

The report also includes graduation rates for the nation’s fifty largest school districts. Among that group is Montgomery County, Maryland, which had the highest graduation rate at 85.7 percent while Detroit, at 33.4 percent, had the lowest graduation rate.

Graduation rates used in the report are calculated using the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) method, which captures the four key steps a student must take in order to graduate: three grade-to-grade promotions (grade nine to grade ten, grade ten to grade eleven, grade eleven to grade twelve) and ultimately earning a diploma (grade twelve to graduation). More information on the CPI method is available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/06/10/34calculate.h29.html>.

In addition to the graduation rate data, the report includes several news articles that explore reform efforts to build meaningful pathways that may not end with a bachelor’s degree, including next-generation high school programs that combine college-prep studies with updated career and technical education, early-college high schools geared to the local labor market, and community colleges that link many high school graduates to higher education and the workplace.

The complete report is available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2011/06/09/index.html>.



HELPING STUDENTS GET BACK ON TRACK: New Alliance Report Offers Recovery Options for Over-age and Undercredited Students

Federal education policy must address the nation’s off-track student population, or those who have fallen behind in credits or are over-age for their grade, according to a new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education. In considering policies to address these students’ needs, the publication calls on federal policymakers to consider lessons learned from the New York City Department of Education’s (NYDOE) Multiple Pathways to Graduation (MPG) initiative.

The report, *Helping Students Get Back on Track: What Federal Policymakers Can Learn from New York City’s Multiple Pathways to Graduation Initiative*, describes the MPG effort and its success in helping off-track students succeed, in part by acknowledging that they are a varied group that requires different educational settings in order to reach the same high standards.

“Just as mail carriers have policies in place to prevent lost packages and get delayed packages back on track, school systems need policies to identify students who have lost their way and help get them back on course,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance and former governor of West Virginia**. “Leaders of the New York City MPG effort recognized this early on and designed educational options specifically for students who had previously been unidentified and underserved. Lessons gleaned from this experience are an invaluable resource for educators and policymakers across the country.”

According to the report, the MPG model is built upon three key principles: access to a range of rigorous academic settings designed to meet particular academic needs, relevancy created by connecting course work with postsecondary opportunities, and comprehensive support to lessen academic and personal challenges. In implementing MPG districtwide, NYDOE also relied on community-based partnerships for each school site and the extensive use of data.

The report offers three federal policy recommendations that take into account the needs of off-track students, New York City’s experience of implementing MPG, and recent discussions around a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

- **Align accountability measurements to the new goals of graduating all students ready for college and a career.** Federal policy must acknowledge the K–12 shift in focus from graduating students “proficient in basic skills” to graduating students “college and career ready.” Recognizing that some schools—such as those that are part of MPG—are designed to serve students who have already fallen off track to graduate in four years, federal policymakers should take steps to ensure that accountability metrics are both appropriate and useful for alternative settings. Federal policymakers should also help accelerate the ability to produce longitudinal statistics about students’ actual outcomes in college and their careers by continuing to invest in the development of state data systems and increasing pressure on states to build linkages across the P–20/workforce pipeline.
- **Leverage data-driven approaches to high school improvement.** Currently, federal policy prescribes a number of one-size-fits-all strategies for districts and schools that receive federal Title I funding and fail to meet annual progress goals. To ensure that

school improvement strategies target a school's unique challenge, it is critical that state, district, and school leaders start using additional data, such as the percentage of off-track students or attendance rates, to identify problems and implement solutions. Federally funded districtwide high school improvement efforts should be required to identify, understand, and develop recuperative options for their dropout and potential dropout populations.

- **Invest in innovative strategies to experiment with new approaches and scale up best practices.** Federal policymakers should ensure that existing funding streams address youth development principles and target schools and programs serving students with the highest challenges. Part of the federal research and development agenda should be dedicated to studying successful strategies for addressing the off-track student population and building the pool of potential partners for helping schools and districts provide nonacademic student supports. Federal policy should also continue to create opportunities to encourage innovation.

To read the full brief, visit <http://www.all4ed.org/files/HelpingStudentsNYC.pdf>.



AFFIRMING THE GOAL: ACT Report Shows Common Standards in Math and Reading to Be Internationally Competitive

The new common core state standards are sufficiently rigorous to ensure that the nation's future workforce will be globally competitive, according to a new report by ACT, Inc. The study, *Affirming the Goal: Is College and Career Readiness an Internationally Competitive Standard?*, examines how performance benchmarks in reading and math on PLAN, ACT's tenth-grade college- and career-readiness assessment, measured up against those on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a standardized international assessment of fifteen-year-old students' academic achievement.

“Our findings affirm that college and career readiness is the right goal for U.S. education,” said **Jon Erickson, interim president of ACT's education division**. “If we ensure that all U.S. students graduate from high school ready for college and career, we can be confident that we are truly offering them a world-class education.”

ACT defines college and career readiness as the level of preparation a student needs to be ready to enroll and succeed in—without remediation—a first-year, credit-bearing course at two- or four-year institutions or in trade or technical schools. According to the report, the common core state standards in English language arts and mathematics are in line with ACT's definition.

To perform this analysis, ACT identified PISA scores equivalent to PLAN's benchmarks for college and career readiness. In reading, the study finds that the college- and career-readiness bar (519) fell within the same range of high-performing countries such as Singapore (526), New Zealand (521), and Australia (515). PLAN's college- and career-readiness standard is also 26 points higher than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) average (493) and 19 points higher than current U.S. performance (500).

It is a similar story in mathematics; PLAN's college- and career-readiness benchmark (530) fell within the same range as countries such as Finland (541), Japan (529), and New Zealand (519). Currently, the United States (487) performs at a level below the OECD average (496). *Affirming the Goal* finds that Shanghai-China, Korea, and Hong Kong-China outperformed ACT's college- and career-readiness benchmarks in math and reading with the addition of Finland in reading and Singapore in math.

Historically, PISA results have reinforced the fact that U.S. students significantly lag behind their international peers. In 2009, U.S. students performed below the PISA average in mathematics and barely above the average in reading. While many other countries have shown improvement on PISA scores, the United States's performance has stagnated.

“In a global economy—where all work can be digitized, automated, or outsourced anywhere on the globe—the benchmark for educational success is no longer measured by state standards, but by the best-performing education systems internationally,” said **Andreas Schleicher, head of indicators and analysis division at OECD and director of PISA**. “This study provides a robust method to establish the global competitiveness of college- and career-readiness state standards through ACT measurement instruments.”

The analysis involved nearly 2,250 tenth-grade students from seventy-seven high schools across the United States who were tested under standardized conditions on both PLAN and special administration of PISA.

To read the full report, visit

<http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/reports/affirmingthegoal.html>.



FISCAL SURVEY OF STATES: New Report Finds Improving State Budgets, but Looming Challenges

Fiscal conditions in states are improving, but have not returned to prerecession levels of 2008, according to a new report from the National Governors Association (NGA) and the National Association of State Budget Officers (NASBO). The report, *The Fiscal Survey of States*, finds that state spending is expected to increase next year by 2.6 percent after rising 5.2 percent this year, but even with those increases, spending will be \$19 billion lower during fiscal 2012 than it was in fiscal 2008, a 2.7 percent decrease.

“The greatest short-term risk to states' recovery comes not from statehouses, but from Washington,” said **NGA Executive Director Dan Crippen**. “While these numbers hopefully mark a turning point in states' recovery, their fiscal health is not likely to return to prerecession levels for some time. The long-term risks to state budgets and our country far overshadow any short-term growth. As states look ahead, it is not just the economy that gives them pause, but also the aging of our population and the seemingly inexorable increase in health care costs.”

The report also points out that states will enter fiscal 2012 without billions of dollars in support from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), or stimulus bill, that they received from the federal government over the last few years. According to the report, states made use of \$135 billion in flexible emergency funding through ARRA in fiscal 2010 and 2011. To help boost revenue, governors have proposed \$13.8 billion in new net taxes and fees for fiscal 2012.

For fiscal 2010, the most recent year for which data is available, Medicaid spending is estimated to account for about 21.8 percent of total spending—the single largest portion of total state spending. The report finds that spending on Medicaid increased by 7.9 percent in fiscal 2010 and is estimated to grow by 11.2 percent in 2011 due to increases in enrollment that came as a result of the economic downturn.

Elementary and secondary education spending, at 20.8 percent, represents the next-largest portion of state spending, followed by higher education (10.1 percent), transportation (8.1 percent), corrections (3.1 percent), public assistance (1.7 percent), and all other expenditures (34.4 percent).

Because education spending makes up such a significant portion of state budgets, it was a frequent target for cuts. According to the report, eighteen of the twenty-three states that made mid-year budget cuts in fiscal 2011 reduced spending on K–12 education; eighteen states cut higher education as well.

“While the report highlights improvements in states fiscal conditions, it also shows the many challenges and tough decisions states will face over the next few years as they fully recover from the economic downturn,” said **Scott Pattison, executive director of NASBO**.

The complete report is available at <http://www.nga.org/Files/pdf/FSS1106.PDF>.

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. Contributors include Jason Amos, editor; Emily Kingsland, writer; and Kate Bradley, copyeditor.

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>.