



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



ALLIANCE PRESIDENT BOB WISE NAMED TO *NONPROFIT TIMES*' TOP 50 MOST INFLUENTIAL EXECUTIVES

On September 15, Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia, was named one of the *NonProfit Times*' "Power & Influence Top 50," which honors the fifty most influential executives in the sector for the previous twelve months. Other individuals honored include Bill Gates, cofounder of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; Helene D. Gayle, president and chief executive officer of CARE USA; and A. Barry Rand, chief executive officer of AARP.

"I'm extremely honored to be named to the *NonProfit Times*' 'Power & Influence Top 50,' but credit for this award goes to the extremely dedicated and hard-working staff at the Alliance for Excellent Education, as well as to the teachers and educators who are on the front line educating our students," Wise said.

Wise was honored for his work leading the Alliance for Excellent Education, 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. Specifically, Wise was cited for his work on rewarding good teachers, raising standards for middle and high schools, and leading the charge on digital learning.

More information on the announcement is available at http://www.all4ed.org/press_room/press_releases/09192011.



SOUND AND FURY OR SIGNIFYING NOTHING?: Flurry of Congressional Activity on NCLB Rewrite As House Passes Charter Schools Bill, House Committee Holds Hearing, and Senate Republicans Introduce Legislation

There was a flurry of activity on Capitol Hill last week around a rewrite of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), but most observers continue to believe that a complete ESEA rewrite is unlikely until after the 2012 presidential election. Still, policymakers saw the September 13 passage of charter school legislation as an encouraging sign that Republicans and Democrats could work together on education reform.

House Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline (R-MN) [said](#) that the strong bipartisan support of the Empowering Parents Through Quality Charter Schools Act, which passed by a vote of 365–54, was an “important first step in our efforts to improve current elementary and secondary education law” and “signals our shared commitment to the reform process.”

Representative George Miller (D-CA), top Democrat on the committee, also [called](#) the bill an “important step forward,” while stressing the need for a “comprehensive reauthorization that provides the relief our schools and our students desperately need.” (More information on the Empowering Parents Through Quality Charter Schools Act is available at http://www.all4ed.org/publication_material/straight_as/06272011#2.)

Signs of bipartisan agreement continued the following day when the House Education and the Workforce Committee held a hearing examining NCLB’s accountability system. During the hearing “Education Reforms: Examining the Federal Role in Public School Accountability,” Republicans and Democrats seemed to agree on the need for a federal accountability system that is less prescriptive and provides greater local flexibility. Members from both parties also stressed the need for college and career readiness and continued transparency around the performance of various student subgroups, including students of color and low-income students.

“Under NCLB’s accountability system, known as Adequate Yearly Progress, all schools that fail to meet target proficiency levels for two or more consecutive years are required to undergo the same series of prescriptive federal interventions, regardless of the unique circumstances or challenges facing each school,” [Kline said](#). “We cannot continue to rely on a one-size-fits-all federal accountability system to gauge the performance of our schools and students.”

Miller discussed the need for “guardrails” that can ensure quality and provide support. “These guardrails must include college- and career-ready standards, goals to ensure those standards are met, and aggressive but achievable annual performance targets so that states, districts, and schools know what is expected of them and continue to move all students forward,” [Miller said](#). “We need to take the next steps: balance the accountability we worked so hard to implement in NCLB with greater flexibility at the local level and less prescription at the federal level.”

Hearing witnesses were **Hanna Skandera, secretary-designate, New Mexico Public Education Department; Blaine Hawley, principal, Red Pump Elementary School in Bel Air, Maryland; Alberto Carvalho, superintendent, Miami-Dade Public Schools; and Amy Sichel, superintendent, Abington, Pennsylvania Public Schools**. Video from the hearing is available at <http://edworkforce.house.gov/Calendar/EventSingle.aspx?EventID=258185>.

Work on NCLB’s accountability system will continue on September 21, when the House Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education will hold an additional hearing on the subject entitled “Education Reforms: Ensuring the Education System Is Accountable to Parents and Communities.” The hearing will be webcast live at <http://edworkforce.house.gov/Calendar/EventSingle.aspx?EventID=259929>.

While the House has chosen to work on separate education bills over comprehensive legislation to reauthorize ESEA, **Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA)** and **HELP Committee Ranking Member Mike Enzi (R-WY)** have been working behind closed doors on a bipartisan basis to develop a comprehensive bill.

Meanwhile, **Senators Lamar Alexander (R-TN), Richard Burr (R-NC), Johnny Isakson (R-GA) and Mark Kirk (R-IL)**—all of whom serve on the HELP Committee—introduced a [series of four education bills](#) that they said would “fix” NCLB. The bills appear to mirror the individual bills that have—or soon will be—introduced in the House. Introduced on September 14, the bills focus on improving state accountability systems; improving teacher and principal professional development programs; consolidating federal education programs; and expanding the number of charter schools.

Alexander told [Education Week’s “Politics K–12” blog](#) that the bills were not a sign that he and his fellow senators did not want to continue to work with Harkin and Enzi on reauthorization. “We’re moving ahead on two tracks,” Alexander said. He said the bills provided a chance for Republicans to “spur the process and outline their own vision for renewing the law.”



INFORMING WRITING: New Alliance Report Offers Evidence That Classroom-Based Assessments Can Improve Writing Skills of American Students

Effective assessments are promising tools to help ensure that students write well enough to meet grade-level demands, according to a new report from Carnegie Corporation of New York, released by the Alliance for Excellent Education on September 15. The report *Informing Writing: The Benefits of Formative Assessment* offers educators and policymakers with evidence-based practices on how assessment can improve the writing skills of American students. (Video from the release event, list of speakers, and other supplemental materials are available at <http://media.all4ed.org/briefing-sep-15-2011>).



“Writing may not receive as much attention as reading and arithmetic, but it is no less important to a student’s future success,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Poor writing skills not only play a role in whether a student graduates from high school, they can also impact his or her success in college or securing a job that pays a living wage.”

According to the latest findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as the Nation’s Report Card, 55 percent of eighth graders and 58 percent of twelfth graders lack mastery of the writing skills needed at their grade level. At the same time, writing is growing more important in today’s jobs, with more than 90 percent of white-collar workers and 80 percent of blue-collar workers reporting that writing is important to job success.

Written by **Steve Graham, Karen R. Harris, and Michael Hebert of Vanderbilt University’s Peabody College of Education**, the report uses the powerful statistical method of meta-analysis to determine that classroom-based writing assessments can help students improve their writing

skills. Additionally, these “formative” assessments allow teachers to gauge the effectiveness of their instructional practices, modify instruction as needed, and provide students with feedback on writing strengths and areas in need of improvement.

The report provides three specific recommendations on how teachers can improve their students’ writing skills and includes examples of how each of the recommendations can be carried out in the classroom. The three recommendations are as follows:

- Provide students with feedback about one or more aspects of their writing.
- Teach students how to assess their own writing.
- Monitor students’ writing progress.

The report also warns that the trustworthiness of formative writing assessments can be compromised if careful attention is not directed at what is assessed, how it is assessed, and how it is scored. To ensure the reliability of assessments, the report outlines the following best practices that teachers can use to assess writing in the classroom:

- Allow students to use the mode of writing in which they are most proficient, such as a word processor or paper and pencil, when completing a writing assessment.
- Minimize the extent to which handwriting legibility or computer printing biases judgments of writing quality.
- Mask the writer’s identity when scoring papers.
- Randomly order students’ papers before scoring them.
- Collect multiple samples of students’ writing.
- Ensure that classroom writing assessments are reliably scored.

Informing Writing identifies three challenges in implementing formative writing assessments and offers possible solutions. First, because scoring writing assessments is labor intensive, the report recommends that students can help share this load. It notes that writing improves when students evaluate their own writing and when peers give feedback to each other. Another option is to use computer-scoring systems, which already provide significant feedback to writers through spell check and other features and will likely improve with time.

The other two challenges identified in the report include teacher preparation, especially among content-area teachers who say that their preparation to teach writing is inadequate, and the need for new policies that establish clear, challenging, and realistic plans for improving writing instruction and students’ writing skills.

Combined with two reports previously released by the Alliance, [Writing Next](#) and [Writing to Read](#), the findings from *Informing Writing* offer a variety of effective instructional methods that teachers can apply to improve the writing and reading achievement of students in America’s middle and high schools. However, the report also finds that research in writing pales in comparison to other academic areas such as reading and mathematics, and must be ramped up to conduct new research on writing development, instructional practices, and assessment procedures.

Informing Writing is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/InformingWriting.pdf>.



INTERNATIONAL INCIDENT: United States Continues Slide in World Economic Forum’s Global Competitive Index

The United States fell from number two to number four in the World Economic Forum’s (WEF) latest Global Competitive Index (GCI). As recently as 2008–09, the United States ranked first. The top ten countries in this year’s ranking are in the table to the right.

Rank	Country	Score	Previous Rank
1	Switzerland	5.63	1
2	Sweden	5.56	4
3	Singapore	5.48	3
4	United States	5.43	2
5	Germany	5.39	7
6	Japan	5.37	8
7	Finland	5.37	6
8	Netherlands	5.33	10
9	Denmark	5.32	5
10	Canada	5.30	9

The rankings are contained in *The Global Competitiveness Index 2011–2012: Setting the Foundations for Strong Productivity*, the latest of WEF’s annual reports on the key factors that determine economic growth and explain why some countries are more successful than others in raising income levels and opportunities for their populations. Put simply, a more competitive economy is one that is likely to grow faster over time, the report notes.

In addition to the overall ranking, the report contains an extensive data section with a detailed profile for 142 countries, including global rankings for over 110 indicators that are divided into twelve pillars of competitiveness.¹ By providing comprehensive listings of the main strengths and weaknesses of countries, the report makes it possible to identify key priorities for policy reform.

The report notes that the United States possesses many structural features that make its economy extremely productive, such as its excellent university system and sheer size, but it finds that a number of escalating weaknesses have lowered the U.S. ranking over the past two years. Specifically, the report notes the public does not demonstrate a strong trust of politicians (54th out of 142) and believes that the government spends its resources relatively wastefully (68th). The United States’ lack of macroeconomic stability (87th), which includes repeated fiscal budget deficits and a growing public debt, continues to be its greatest weakness. According to the report, the United States ranks 139 out of 142 countries in government budget balance as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) and 132 in general government debt as a percentage of GDP. “It is clear that mapping out a clear exit strategy will be an important step in reinforcing the country’s competitiveness going into the future,” the report finds.

U.S. Ranking in Twelve Pillars of the GCI

Pillar	Rank	Previous Rank
Institutions	39	40
Infrastructure	16	15
Macroeconomic Environment	90	87
Health and Primary Education	42	42
Higher Education and Training	13	9
Goods Market Efficiency	24	26
Labor Market Efficiency	4	4
Financial Market Development	22	31
Technological Readiness	20	17
Market Size	1	1
Business Sophistication	10	8
Innovation	5	1

¹ The twelve pillars of competitiveness are institutions; infrastructure; macroeconomic environment; health and primary education; higher education and training; goods market efficiency; labor market efficiency; financial market development; technological readiness; market size; business sophistication; and innovation.

The Global Competitiveness Index 2011–2012 combines health and primary education into a single pillar, but breaks out several education indicators, including quality of primary education and percentage of students enrolled in primary education, in which the United States ranks 37 out of 142 and 77, respectively. The report notes that basic education “increases the efficiency of each individual worker,” while a lack of basic education can “become a constraint on business development.” As nations look to reduce debt that has built up over the past few years, the report cautions that it will be “essential to avoid significant reductions in resource allocation to [health and primary education].”

The fifth pillar, higher education and training, provides a much fuller picture of how the United States education system ranks in a global context. Rankings in this category are based on enrollment rates as well as the quality of education as evaluated by the business

U.S. Ranking in Selected Education Categories

Category	Rank	Previous Rank
Secondary Education Enrollment	50	45
Tertiary Education Enrollment (Gross Percentage)	6	6
Quality of the Education System	26	26
Quality of Math and Science Education	51	52
Internet Access in Schools	24	14

community. As shown in the chart above, the United States ranks 6 out of 142 in tertiary education enrollment, but has slipped in other categories, including secondary education enrollment, which declined five positions, and internet access in schools, which declined ten.

The complete report is available at

http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GlobalCompetitivenessReport_2010-11.pdf.



ANYTIME, ANYPLACE: New Alliance Report Says Expanded Learning Opportunities Can Provide a Comprehensive Approach to Preparing High School Students for College and a Career

Expanded learning opportunities for high school students through methods such as work-based experiences, innovative technology, and personalized lesson plans have the potential to help address projected skill and knowledge shortages in the nation’s workforce, according to a new policy brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education.

“More so than with students in elementary and middle schools, ‘anytime, anyplace’ learning has especially strong potential for high school students, whose unique needs and challenges are often best met outside the traditional high school structure,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Surpassing traditional boundaries of education is essential in order to help more students graduate college and career ready in the twenty-first century, which in turn aids the nation’s future economic outlook.”

The brief “Expanding Learning Opportunities: A More Comprehensive Approach to Preparing High School Students for College and a Career” suggests that schools consider a variety of innovative strategies as they strive to graduate more students who are ready for college and a career. Possible methods include allowing flexibility regarding time, location, and delivery of education; providing opportunities for students to apply knowledge in real-world situations; and ensuring social and academic supports.

According to the brief, a survey of high school dropouts shows 32 percent said they did not graduate because they took a job, 26 percent said it was because they became parents, and 22 percent said it was because they had to help their families. An “anytime, anywhere” learning strategy that allows students to take credit-bearing courses online or provides workplace learning opportunities for students to apply their learning can help create a more personalized system of learning that is both aligned with rigorous academic standards and suited to meet the unique needs of today’s high school students.

The twenty-first-century global economy is demanding more from educators than just employing traditional teaching methods. Employers increasingly want to hire individuals who can apply knowledge in creative ways, and schools need to prepare students for this new job market. Unfortunately, the nation’s schools are falling behind in this regard. According to the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce (the Center), the U.S. economy is estimated to require 22 million new employees with postsecondary education in the next decade, but the nation is expected to fall 3 million degrees short.

“The Center’s projections highlight an unfortunate long-term economic trend—one that places a particular focus on the nation’s high school students,” Wise said. “The economy now requires a knowledge- and innovation-centered workforce, and as the composition and demands of the American workforce continue to evolve, so too must the American high school.”

Expanded learning opportunities engage students in creative means of education that apply directly to real-life situations through service learning, work-based learning, technology-based learning, and other methods, the brief finds. An innovative approach that focuses on relating students’ learning to their futures can be particularly helpful for low-income students or students of color who may not otherwise have access to postsecondary experiences or real-world role models.

“Expanding Learning Opportunities” provides case studies from California’s Linked Learning initiative, United LA, Big Picture Learning, and the National Academy Foundation that show examples of successful expanded learning initiatives.

To learn more about how states and school districts can better prepare students through expanded learning opportunities, read the full brief at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/ExpandedLearningOpps.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; Clara Hogan, 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>.