

ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



BUILDING A GRAD NATION: New Report Finds More than Half of States Increased High School Graduation Rate, Number of “Dropout Factory” High Schools Decreased by 23 Percent Since 2002

The national high school graduation rate increased from 72.6 percent in 2002 to 75.5 percent in 2009, according to a new report from Civic Enterprises, the Everyone Graduates Center, America’s Promise Alliance, and the Alliance for Excellent Education. The report, *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic*, finds that twenty-four states increased high school graduation rates by modest to large gains while the number of high schools graduating 60 percent or fewer students on time—often referred to as “dropout factories”—decreased from 2,007 schools in 2002 to 1,550 schools in 2010.

“The good news is that some states have made improvements in their graduation rates, showing it can be done,” said **Robert Balfanz, director of the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University and coauthor of the report.** “But the data also indicate that if we are to meet our national goals by 2020, we will have to accelerate our rate of progress, particularly in the states that have shown little progress.”

According to the report, six states increased their high school graduation rates as measured by the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR) by 7 percentage points or more between 2002 and 2009.¹ Tennessee, which increased its graduation rate by 17.8 percentage points (from 59.6 percent to 77.4 percent), had the largest increase, followed by New York (an increase of 13 percentage points), South Carolina (up 8.1 percentage points), Alabama (up 7.8 percentage points), Kentucky (up 7.8 percentage points), and Vermont (up 7.6 percentage points).

Additionally, fourteen states increased their graduation rates by “moderate” amounts (3.0 to 6.9 percentage points) while four states made “modest” gains (2.7 to 2.9 percentage points). On the down side, sixteen states saw little to no progress in their high school graduation rates while ten states saw their graduation rates decline.

Building a Grad Nation identifies thirteen states (Arizona, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Virginia, and Washington) that have the most work to do to help the nation reach the 90 percent graduation rate goal by 2020.

¹ The AFGR provides an estimate of the percentage of high school students who graduate on time. The rate uses aggregate student enrollment data to estimate the size of an incoming freshman class and counts of the number of diplomas awarded four years later.

“In large part the battle will be won or lost in the thirteen states that have the largest number of students to get back on track to graduate,” said **John Bridgeland, chief executive officer of Civic Enterprises and coauthor of the report**. “[These states] need to accelerate their progress two- to three-fold in order to reach [the 2020 goal.]”

If every state had reached the goal of a 90 percent high school graduation rate, 580,000 additional students would have graduated as part of the Class of 2011, generating more than 37,000 new jobs and increasing the gross domestic product by \$6.6 billion, the report finds.

The report also finds that southern states and schools in the suburbs saw the largest declines in the number of dropout factory schools between 2002 and 2009, with 410 and 171 schools, respectively. Texas, which reduced its number of dropout factories by 122 schools between 2002 and 2010 made the greatest progress, followed by Florida (a decrease of 62 schools) and Georgia (a decrease of 54 schools).

“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 high 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 effort to improve the graduation rate.”

Building a Grad Nation also updates progress made on the ten Civic Marshall Plan benchmarks, such as grade-level reading, chronic absenteeism, early warning systems, and state compulsory school-age requirements. As highlighted by President Obama in his 2012 State of the Union address, state laws dictate the minimum and maximum age that all youths must attend school. While the majority of states have a compulsory school age of seventeen or eighteen years of age, eighteen states still legally permit students to leave school at sixteen years of age.

Finally, the report features states and school districts that are making significant gains and shares promising practices from nonprofits, businesses, media, educational, and governmental institutions across the country. It spotlights case studies in Dothan, Alabama; the state of Georgia; Henry Grady High School in Atlanta; Houston; and Washington County Public Schools in Maryland.

“In order to accelerate the progress highlighted in this report, it is critical that we identify the initiatives that are most effective in reducing the dropout rate,” said **Charlene Lake, senior vice president of public affairs and chief sustainability officer for AT&T**, which sponsored the report with additional support from the Pearson Foundation. “Working together to scale these evidenced-based strategies will be vital to helping our students succeed and meeting our national objectives.”

The complete report is available at <http://www.americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Grad-Nation/Building-a-Grad-Nation.aspx>.

AT&T Accepting Proposals for Its Aspire Local High School Impact Initiative

The 2012 AT&T Aspire Local High School Impact Initiative is now accepting proposals from currently operating high school retention programs that consist of elements aligned to the [What Works Clearinghouse \(WWC\) Dropout Prevention Practice Guide](#). AT&T is looking to support organizations that are delivering results that reduce the dropout rate in their communities, and are ready to expand their program to serve additional students or locations, or to add components to strengthen successful programs.

Under the initiative, payments ranging from \$100,000 to \$300,000 for twenty-four months are available for local programs with an emphasis

- providing service to high school students at risk of dropping out of school;
- supporting ninth graders or students in transition from eighth to ninth grade;
- intervening quickly with targeted services to help these students reengage;
- increasing students' chances of earning a high school diploma;
- preparing students for college and/or a career; and
- providing substantial data to demonstrate positive outcomes.

The RFP deadline is April 27, 2012. Visit <http://www.att.com/gen/press-room?pid=22593> for more information.



MISSION CRITICAL: Senate HELP Committee Examines Key Role That a Quality Education Plays in America's Competitiveness

During a Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee hearing on March 8, senators from both political parties stressed the importance of additional education after high school to landing a good job in today's economy, but they noted that the American education system was preparing far too few students to achieve it. The hearing, "The Key to America's Global Competitiveness: A Quality Education," also featured business leaders, economists, and education experts who discussed how to solve the challenges facing the American education system and how doing so could power the American economy for generations.

"What our children and grandchildren learn today will determine America's productivity in the future, and that depends on preparing them to compete in a global marketplace more competitive than at any other time in history," said **Senate HELP Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA)** in his opening statement. "But while globalization and technology have dramatically increased the skills and qualifications required to succeed today, our schools are largely geared toward the assumptions of a twentieth-century workplace."

Harkin spent a significant portion of his opening statement discussing the link between higher education and a quality job. He observed that the path into the middle class is "more than ever" linked to a worker's level of education attainment, but he said "this critical door to the middle class does not swing equally wide for everyone." He noted that the college graduation rate of American youths from families in the top quarter of the income distribution increased by 21 percentage points between the late 1970s and the mid 1990s, but it increased by only 4 percentage points for children from families in the lowest quartile of income distribution during the same time.

In his opening statement, **Senator Mike Enzi (R-WY), top Republican on the HELP Committee**, outlined two major challenges facing the United States. First, a growing number of

jobs require additional education after high school; and second, other countries continue to surpass the United States in proportion of workers with at least a high school diploma.

Enzi noted that about 7,000 students drop out of high school every day while many of those who do graduate often must take remedial courses when they enter college. “This lack of preparation means that our college students spend more time and money paying tuition just to catch up,” Enzi said. “It’s hard for them and it’s hard for our country to get ahead if we’re playing catch-up. ... Among minority students, remedial course participation rates are even higher and completion rates are even lower.”

In her testimony, witness **Jennifer Mann, vice president of human resources for SAS**, which specializes in business analytics software and services, discussed the difficulty SAS faces in hiring workers with the skills it needs. She said SAS seeks to hire individuals with deep analytical expertise in statistics, operations research, and econometrics, as well as “softer” skills, such as relationship skills, collaboration, critical thinking, and being self-directed learners. Mann mentioned some of SAS’s efforts to attract workers and better prepare students in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields.

Mann also discussed the important role the common core state standards (CCSS) will play in helping the United States improve its education system. “SAS believes that the CCSS presents a chance to catch up with other countries that are outperforming the U.S.,” she said. “This is a critical step in preparing our students for the global economy, and a step that the business community can and should fully support.”

Charles Kolb, president of the Committee for Economic Development (CED), a nonpartisan, business-led public policy organization based in Washington, DC, said that investments in human capital would determine how productive and competitive the United States is in the global economy. To that end, he discussed CED’s work considering education spending as an investment that “asks tough accountability-oriented questions about the returns on these investments.” He noted that, until recently, America’s postsecondary education system has avoided the accountability questions that characterize K–12 education policy discussions. Kolb also previewed an April 2012 report that focuses on ways in which greater innovation, productivity, and efficiency could drive needed reforms across the postsecondary sector.

In his testimony, **Eric A. Hanushek, Paul and Jean Hanna Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University**, outlined two potential paths for the lives of American children and the United States’s future place in the world economy. On the current path, the nation will continue to have “middling” schools and moderate real income growth, which will lead to “increasing struggles and discord over the income distribution and how to spend our limited public budgets,” Hanushek said. On a different path, one with better-educated children, international economic leadership, and a faster growing economy, Hanushek said the United States could “solve our fiscal and distributional problems not with battles over the balance of revenues and spending but by ensuring that the pie grows.”

According to Hanushek, raising American students’ math performance to the level of Canadian students on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) would have a present

value of \$75–80 trillion. To put those numbers into perspective, Hanushek said the United States’s economy has a total gross domestic product of less than \$16 trillion.

“Nearly all of today’s policy debates focus narrowly on pulling out of the current downturn in the economy,” Hanushek said. “But frankly, the importance of dealing with this—and I realize its importance to many families today—is simply dwarfed by the long-run growth of the economy. This focus on today may serve short-term political interests during this election year, but it neglects our children and their future.”

The final witness, **Richard Murnane, Juliana W. and William Foss Thompson Professor of Education and Society at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education**, discussed school and educator reform strategies to ensure that more students graduate college and career ready. He noted that schools effectively educating disadvantaged children provide extra instruction and learning opportunities after traditional school hours, on Saturdays, and during the summer months. He said high schools effectively serving disadvantaged students “provide the learning opportunities in workplaces and in other nonschool settings and the cultural experiences and tutoring that affluent parents provide to their teenagers.”

Murnane said “capacity building, including high-quality academic standards, curricula aligned with the standards, and professional development aimed at improving the quality and consistency of instruction” should be paired with incentives and accountability to help the nation’s educators to ensure all students graduate from high school college and career ready. He added that results from value-added models should not solely be used to dismiss or reward teachers, but they should be used to identify teachers whose students are making relatively great—or relatively little—academic progress. These results should then be paired with other methods, including classroom observation by well-trained coaches or supervisors, to “figure out the cause of the atypical performance.”

Witness testimony and video of the hearing is available at <http://www.help.senate.gov/hearings/hearing/?id=a9d8260e-5056-9502-5d97-bcbec7f63d0c>.



THE METLIFE SURVEY OF THE AMERICAN TEACHER: TEACHERS, PARENTS, AND THE ECONOMY: Teacher Job Satisfaction at Lowest Level in Two Decades, Survey Finds

Over the last two years, teacher job satisfaction has fallen by 15 percentage points and is now at the lowest level seen in more than two decades, according to the latest MetLife Survey of the American Teacher. This year’s survey, *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Teachers, Parents, and the Economy*, is the twenty-eighth in an annual series to give voice to those closest to the classroom and is the first large-scale national survey to fully reflect the effects of the economy on the teaching profession.

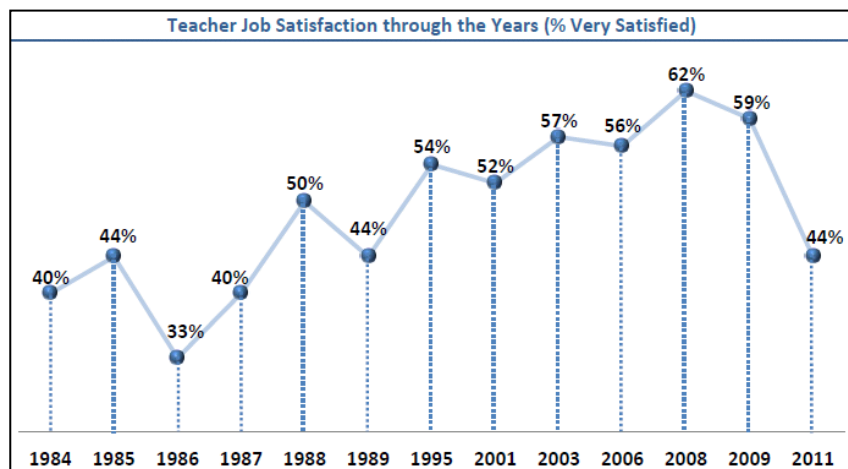
“The survey’s findings underscore that education is a shared responsibility, particularly in the face of financial challenges,” said **Dennis White, vice president of corporate contributions for MetLife**. “Economic prosperity will depend on a new generation well-prepared to learn for a lifetime in order to compete and collaborate in a global economy. MetLife is proud to add the

valuable data in this report to the pool of information policymakers and education leaders can draw upon as they make their decisions.”

According to the report, teacher job satisfaction fell from 59 percent of teachers saying they are “very satisfied” with their careers in 2009—the last time the MetLife survey reported on this issue—to 44 percent, the lowest level since 1986.

Additionally, 29 percent of teachers reported that they are likely to leave teaching

for another profession, compared to 17 percent in 2009. Teachers are also more than four times more likely than they were in 2006—the last time the question was asked—to say that they do not feel their job is secure (34 percent compared to 8 percent).



The report breaks out several questions based on teacher job satisfaction and finds that teachers with lower job satisfaction are more likely than those with higher job satisfaction to be in schools that have had teacher layoffs (49 percent to 37 percent) or a reduction of other school staff (66 percent versus 49 percent). Teachers with lower job satisfaction are also more likely to report that they have seen increases in average class size (70 percent to 53 percent).

On the other hand, teachers with higher job satisfaction are more likely to have experienced adequate opportunities for professional development, time to collaborate with other teachers, and more preparation and support for engaging parents effectively.

The report also finds that the effects of the economic downturn have been felt “widely and deeply” in education. Specifically, it finds that 76 percent of teachers said that their school’s budget decreased during the past year while 66 percent reported that their school laid off teachers or other staff. Finally, more than one-third reported that educational technology and learning materials have not been kept up to date.

“Resolving the challenges of declining morale and money must be first order so that educators and schools can be focused on their most critical task: preparing students for college and a career in the twenty-first century,” [said Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia.](#) “Across the country, states and schools are raising standards. We can hardly be surprised when teachers are discouraged by being asked to do more, but are given less to do it.”

Not surprisingly, the impact of the economic downturn did not stop at the school door. According to the survey, which also questioned parents and students, 72 percent of parents and 65 percent of students worry about their families not having enough money for the things they

need. Additionally, 62 percent of parents and 54 percent of students worry about the parents losing or not being able to find a job.

The complete report is available at <http://www.metlife.com/teachersurvey>.



NEW PLATFORM FOR LEARNING: Duncan Discusses Role of Technology in Education, Calls It a “Game Changer”

During a March 8 speech at SXSWedu’s second annual conference on innovations in learning in Austin, Texas, **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** called technology the “new platform for learning,” and outlined several ways that technology is already changing education—from helping teachers personalize education to students working at their own pace—and highlighted locations around the country that are using technology to boost student achievement and engagement.

“I really believe that technology is a game changer in the field of education—a game changer we desperately need to both improve achievement for all and increase equity for children and communities who have been historically underserved,” Duncan said. “Technology offers children the opportunity to work at their own pace, pursue their own interests and passions, and provides access to more information through a cell phone than I could find as a child in an entire library.”

Duncan highlighted several federal initiatives to support the use of technology in education, including a [Learning Registry](#) to help teachers and parents discover resources online, competitive funding programs like Race to the Top that make technology a priority, and the expansion of broadband to thousands of communities in an effort to connect them all by 2015.

Duncan said that technology is replacing paper and pencil, textbooks, chalkboards, and the globe in classrooms around the country and will soon replace the bubble test on which many local accountability systems are based. At the same time, however, Duncan stressed that technology will never replace teachers.

“This issue too often gets sidetracked into a silly debate over whether we need computers or teachers—when everyone knows we need both,” Duncan said. “Great teachers with access to great technology transform children’s life choices.”

Duncan’s complete speech is available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/new-platform-learning>.

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; Kenya Downs, communications associate; 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>.