



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



STATE OF THE UNION: Obama Announces Competition for High Schools in Address to Congress, Nation

In his February 12 [State of the Union address](#) centered on a “growing economy that creates good, middle-class jobs,” President Obama outlined several education proposals, including high-quality preschool available to every child, greater access for high school students to take college courses, and a new competition to redesign America’s high schools.



“Four years ago, we started Race to the Top—a competition that convinced almost every state to develop smarter curricula and higher standards, all for about 1 percent of what we spend on education each year,” Obama said. “Tonight, I’m announcing a new challenge to redesign America’s high schools so they better equip graduates for the demands of a high-tech economy.”

Obama said the competition would reward schools that develop new partnerships with colleges and employers and create classes that focus on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).

In a [statement](#), **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**, praised the president’s high school proposal. “President Obama offered few details on the high school challenge in last night’s State of the Union address, but I see great potential,” Wise said. “If the nation is serious about the high school dropout crisis, more must be done to engage students and make learning relevant. The president’s proposal appears to do both.”

Wise added that the initiative could also help improve school turnaround policy by encouraging successful schools and programs while also inspiring additional approaches based on their successes. Additional information on the president’s proposal could be included in his Fiscal Year 2014 budget, which is expected to be released in March or April.

In discussing his preschool proposal, Obama noted that fewer than three in ten four-year-olds are enrolled in a high-quality preschool program—a lack of access that can “shadow” students for the rest of their lives. He said that every dollar invested in early education can save more than

seven dollars down the road by boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy, and reducing violent crime. “We know this works. So let’s do what works and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind. Let’s give our kids that chance,” Obama said.

Turning to higher education, Obama called on the U.S. Congress to change the Higher Education Act so that “affordability and value are included in determining which colleges receive certain types of federal aid.” He also released a new “[College Scorecard](#)” that parents and students can use to compare schools based on “where you can get the most bang for your educational buck.”

A video and transcript of the State of the Union are available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2013>.



SEQUESTER TO HIT MARCH 1: White House Details Impact of Across-the-Board Cuts to Federal Education Programs in New Report

On February 24, the White House released a [report with state-by-state funding tables](#) detailing how the “sequester”—the formal name for the \$85 billion in across-the-board cuts to domestic and defense spending scheduled to occur on March 1—will affect federal programs, including education programs such as Title I and special education.

For Title I, the report projects a \$726 million cut to Fiscal Year 2013 funding, reaching nearly 2,700 schools, 9,900 school staff, and potentially more than 1.1 million students. Funding cuts range from a high of \$87.6 million in California to \$1 million in New Hampshire. Special education funding would be cut by \$579 million and could lead to losing nearly 7,000 school staff. The figures included in the report are based on a 5 percent across-the-board cut.

“Education is the last place to be reducing our investment as the nation continues to climb out of the recent recession and to prepare all of its citizens to meet the challenges created by global economic competitiveness in the twenty-first century,” **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** said in a February 14 [Senate Appropriations Committee hearing](#) on the impacts of sequestration. “Indeed, I can assure you that our economic competitors are increasing, not decreasing, their investments in education, and we can ill afford to fall behind as a consequence of the indiscriminate, across-the-board cuts that would be required by sequestration.”

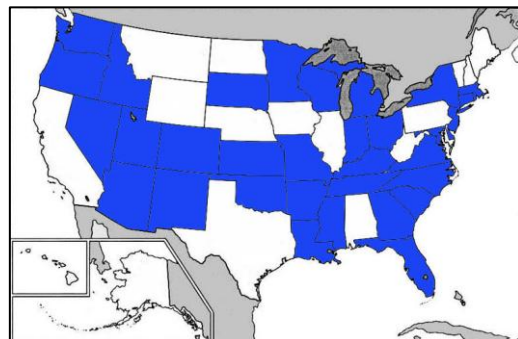
During the same hearing, Duncan explained that the impact of sequestration would not reduce funding until the 2013–14 school year for federal education programs, such as Title I, that are forward-funded, but he said school districts will be making decisions in April and May about which jobs to cut and which teacher contracts to renew. This notwithstanding, some students would feel an immediate impact, including military dependents and Native American students that receive support from the Impact Aid program.

“Fewer teachers and staff could mean larger class sizes, fewer courses or subject areas, less tutoring for struggling students, reductions in counseling, and more difficulty in retaining recently hired teachers,” Duncan said. “And local economies will suffer from the higher unemployment and the uncertainty of the staff.”



TURNING BACK THE CLOCK?: ESEA Waivers Could Slow Progress on High School Graduation Rate Accountability, New Alliance Analysis Finds

An extensive analysis by the Alliance for Excellent Education shows that recent progress in holding schools accountable for how many students they graduate from high school—the ultimate goal of K–12 education—may be slowed in some states based on waivers recently granted under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The Alliance’s findings are contained in a new report, *The Effect of ESEA Waiver Plans on High School Graduation Rate Accountability*, which includes a review of approved waiver plans submitted by thirty-four states and the District of Columbia. (States whose waiver plans are reflected in the report are colored in blue in the map above.)



“Waivers offer states a tremendous opportunity; rather than being constrained by the decade-old No Child Left Behind Act, states can design and implement innovative reforms that improve their education systems and more effectively prepare their students for college and a career,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “While waivers can provide needed flexibility in many areas, unfortunately a number of waiver plans appear to turn back the clock on high school graduation rate accountability.”

Based on an initial formula developed by the nation’s governors, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) issued graduation rate regulations in 2008 that required all public high schools to use the same, accurate graduation rate calculation and report a graduation rate for both the entire student body, as well as for various subgroups of students, including students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, and English language learners. The regulations required states to establish ambitious but achievable graduation rate goals and targets and intervene if a subgroup of students fell short of these targets.

The report notes that each state will still be required to calculate and report high school graduation rates in accordance with the 2008 regulations. Only a few states, however, are fully implementing the 2008 graduation rate regulations for accountability purposes as well.

According to the report, waiver plans in many states run counter to the intent of the 2008 regulations. For example:

- Eleven states have been approved to use a measure of high school completion that is inconsistent with the 2008 regulations. For example, two states are permitted to include a General Education Diploma (GED) in their accountability system when the 2008 regulations explicitly say the GED cannot be used.
- In eleven states, accountability for the high school graduation rates of various student subgroups—students of color, low-income students, students with a disability, and English language learners—is weak or nonexistent.

- In twelve states, high school graduation rates account for less than 25 percent of the state’s accountability system and no longer counterbalance the emphasis on test scores, creating a possible incentive for states to “push out” low-performing students in order to increase a school’s overall test scores.
- Ten states lack the safeguards originally put in place by ED to maintain an emphasis on graduating as many students as possible in four years while also providing the flexibility to graduate some students in more than four years.

A breakdown of states that fall into each category, as well as a thorough analysis of each state’s approved waiver plan, are included in the report.

Not all states, however, are implementing policies that are inconsistent with each provision of the 2008 regulations. Only modest changes are necessary to bring many states into full compliance with the letter and spirit of the 2008 regulations. And some states, such as Delaware and New York, are implementing policies that are comparable to or stronger than the 2008 regulations.

Report Recommendations

In the short term, the report recommends that ED and states work together to address discrepancies between the approved 2008 regulations and the recently approved waivers, including inaccurate and inconsistent measures of high school completion, the inclusion of GEDs, and the lack of subgroup accountability. Over the longer term—i.e., when state waivers need to be renewed—the report urges ED and states to implement a stronger and more coherent system of high school graduation rate accountability that aligns with the 2008 regulations and ensures that high schools with low graduation rates are properly identified and receive targeted support.

“Ultimately, the most effective way to assure effective graduation rate policy is for the U. S. Congress to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in a way that holds states accountable for improving high school graduation rates for all students, especially those who have historically been underserved by the nation’s high schools,” said Wise.

The Effect of ESEA Waiver Plans on High School Graduation Rate Accountability is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/ESEAWaivers.pdf>.



HELP ON NCLB: Senators Harkin and Alexander Affirm Need to Go Back to Work on NCLB Rewrite During HELP Committee Hearing on Early Lessons from NCLB Waivers

During a February 7 hearing on “Early Lessons from State Flexibility Waivers” under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), both **Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA)** and **Ranking Member Lamar Alexander (R-TN)**, said Congress should go back to work on a rewrite of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as NCLB.



In his [opening statement](#), Harkin said that in October 2011 the HELP Committee passed a bipartisan reauthorization of ESEA with “robust participation” from Alexander and other committee members. Harkin noted that the bill did not move beyond the committee, but he said in the new Congress, “we are redoubling our efforts to reauthorize ESEA.”

Alexander agreed, saying that Congress should “go back to work this year” on a reauthorization of ESEA and “let the Secretary step back from waivers and let the states make their own decisions about whether students and teachers are succeeding or failing.”

In his testimony, **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** defended the Obama administration’s decision to waive certain requirements of NCLB in exchange for states’ commitments to implement college- and career-ready standards, develop strong systems of accountability and improvement, and strengthen teacher effectiveness and support. He characterized waivers as a “federal-state partnership” that permits states receiving waivers to design a plan meeting the unique needs of their districts, schools, principals, teachers, and students, rather than a “federally mandated, top-down system.”

Duncan acknowledged that NCLB’s goals—“holding all students to the same, challenging standards; closing achievement gaps; and providing transparency and accountability for the proficiency and graduation rates of all students”—are the right ones. However, he also said the law had gradually changed from an “instrument of reform into a barrier to reform” as more and more schools were labeled as failures—even those making progress in educating disadvantaged students—and closing achievement gaps. “The kids who have lost the most from that change are those who benefitted the most in the early years of NCLB—students with disabilities, low-income and minority students, and English learners.”

Duncan said states, such as Colorado and New York, were using waivers to implement more effective accountability systems that use multiple measures of school and student performance rather than a “single test on a single day.” He praised Massachusetts and Kentucky for creating state-level offices and regional centers to oversee and support low-performing schools and districts. He also said waivers support improved teaching and learning through more rigorous standards and better support and evaluation systems for principals and teachers.

In his [opening statement](#), Alexander called the waiver process a Washington, DC version of “Mother, May I?” He noted that the waiver authority contained in NCLB is a “pretty simple authority,” but he also said Duncan’s use of the waiver authority has “gone much broader” than a “yes” or “no” to a conditional waiver permitting the secretary to make decisions that Alexander said should be made by state and local authorities. “The correct thing . . . to do is for the secretary to show restraint on a one-size-fits-all set of waivers and step back and just say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in a much simpler way, giving more allowance.”

Video of the hearing and transcripts of witness testimony are available at <http://www.help.senate.gov/hearings/hearing/?id=a9b7a0b5-5056-a032-52dd-885ec6a64c32>.



A STEP FORWARD OR A STEP BACK?: New Education Trust Report Finds “A Lot of Backsliding” in States’ Approved NCLB Waiver Plans

A new report from the Education Trust finds that, by granting states waivers from certain requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, the U.S. Department of Education “opened the door for some innovation” but also allowed for “a lot of backsliding” on the nation’s commitment to close gaps and raise achievement for all students. The report, *A Step Forward or a Step Back?: State Accountability in the Waiver Era*, finds that schools in “far too many” states can get good ratings even with low performance for some student groups and that approaches to improving poorly performing schools are “too timid.”

“When it became clear that Congress couldn’t reach agreement on a long-overdue reauthorization of the law, we understood the consequences of not granting some kind of flexibility,” said **Kati Haycock, president of the Education Trust**. “But supporting the concept of a waiver process is very different from supporting how that process moved forward or the final agreements that resulted. In the end, while some states showed real courage in the effort to move the needle on school improvement, far too many were allowed to create systems that weaken the civil rights commitments of federal law.”

The report includes four key findings and offers both good and bad ideas that were included in state waiver plans and approved by the U.S. Department of Education:

- While most states set ambitious goals for raising student achievement and closing gaps between groups—often expecting much higher annual improvement than they attained under NCLB—most states did not make students’ performance against those goals actually count in ratings assigned to schools. In New Mexico, for example, a school could receive an “A” rating even if it consistently misses annual goals for its Latino students.
- Some states created “super subgroups” to ensure that schools with small numbers of students in a particular group—such as English language learners or American Indian students—did not escape responsibility for the achievement of those students. At the same time, however, the report cautions that super subgroups could potentially mask very different performances among the various groups of students making up the super subgroup.
- Rather than using additional indicators to determine overall and group performance, most states solely rely on state test results and graduation rates for their accountability systems, ignoring other measurements of student performance, such as college and career readiness.
- Most states’ plans for strengthening their lowest-performing schools are improvements over NCLB, but the report finds a “very real risk” that, in some states, students in large swaths of schools won’t get the support and attention they need. For example, in a number of states, a lack of improved outcomes at the lowest-performing schools only brings about more improvement planning.

In addition to examining the accountability systems that states put forward in their waiver applications, the report offers questions that advocates can ask about (1) state expectations for

raising achievement and closing gaps and (2) actions the accountability systems prompt when schools exceed expectations or repeatedly fall short.

“Some states have a long, well-documented history of aiming for the lowest common denominator when given the latitude to set expectations, especially for their most vulnerable students. And in too many places, the waivers allowed more of the same,” said **Daria Hall, director of K–12 policy at the Education Trust and author of the report**. “Several plans send mixed messages to educators and parents about what schools should be aiming for and whether they really need to focus on educating all kids to high levels. That makes it ever more important for advocates and others to take a close look at these plans and keep a keen eye on their state’s efforts.”

The complete report is available at

http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/A_Step_Forward_Or_A_Step_Back.pdf.

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS: In-State Coalition Building and Outreach Around the Common Core State Standards

Achieve, in partnership with the Alliance for Excellent Education, Council of Chief State School Officers, and the James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy, through a grant from the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust, is launching a new opportunity to support in-state coalition building and outreach around the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The multiyear project seeks to identify, support, and advise third-party coalitions in up to six states from May 2013 through October 2015 to help ensure successful CCSS implementation and sustainability. Successful applicants will receive funding up to \$200,000 per year, for three years.

Organizations or coalitions applying for the award must be from one of the following states: Alabama, Arizona, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Ohio, New Jersey, North Carolina, Tennessee, or Washington. Eligible applicants include

- state-based coalitions that can demonstrate support for the CCSS and the college- and career-ready agenda; *or*
- third-party organizations that can demonstrate support for the CCSS and the college- and career-ready agenda applying on behalf of a group of coalitions or third-party organizations in a state willing to participate in a CCSS support coalition.

Interested and qualifying coalitions/organizations should contact Achieve at rwittenstein@achieve.org with the subject line “Helmsley Charitable Trust CCSS Coalition Support Award” to learn more about and receive a copy of the Request for Proposal. Proposals are due March 15. Winning coalitions will be notified by the end of April 2013.

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; Cyndi Waite; and Kate Bradley.

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 www.all4ed.org; follow the Alliance on Twitter (www.twitter.com/all4ed); Facebook (www.facebook.com/all4ed); and the Alliance’s “High School Soup” blog (www.all4ed.org/blog).