



ALLIANCE FOR  
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

# Straight A's:

## An Update on Public Education: Policy and Progress

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### **EVERY CHILD A GRADUATE: Alliance Releases New Report on Improving Student Performance in Middle and High Schools**

In its new report, *Every Child a Graduate*, the Alliance for Excellent Education calls for the implementation of four recommendations to boost student performance in middle and high schools. These recommendations, called a Framework for an Excellent Education, include an adolescent literacy initiative, a set of new initiatives to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers in high-need areas, a personalized plan to prepare students for college, and smaller learning communities.

The report will be released at the National Press Club at 10 a.m. on Sept. 24. The presenters will be Susan Frost, Executive Director, and Scott Joftus, Policy Director, Alliance for Excellent Education. Respondents will be Richard W. Riley, Former Secretary, U.S. Department of Education; Gerry House President and CEO, Institute for Student Achievement and former school superintendent (Memphis, Tenn. and Chapel Hill, N.C.); and Jane Hannaway, Director, Education Policy Center, Urban Institute.

For a copy of the full report, visit <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/reports.html>



### **THE CHALLENGE: Six Million Students are in Danger of Being “Left Behind”**

As the nation's schoolchildren head back to school and school districts begin to implement the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation, one thing is very clear—six million students in our nation's middle schools and high schools are in serious danger of being left behind. These young people live in our cities, suburbs, and rural areas, and reflect all income levels.

While great attention has been paid to increasing early childhood education opportunities and reaching the national goal of making sure every child can read by third grade, little has been done to confront the real and growing problem: Hundreds of thousands of high school students can barely read on the eve of their high school graduation. The problem begins earlier, in our nation's middle schools. Less than 75 percent of all eighth graders graduate from high school in five years, and, in urban schools, these rates dip below 50 percent.

## The Challenge: Six Million Students are in Danger of Being “Left Behind”

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The good news is that we know how to educate low-performing adolescents to high standards, and many schools are doing so. These schools are raising the achievement levels and increasing the options available to students who would otherwise drop out or merely “get by.”

We know that there is no single strategy for increasing student achievement. Successful secondary schools take a multi-pronged approach to educate and support all students. Effective, research-based models share a set of common components for educating at-risk students to high standards. Working in partnership with states and local school districts, the federal government can play a significant role in ensuring that these essential components are in place in every middle school and high school in the country.

### Graduation Rate by District and Race

District	Graduation Rate	African-American Graduation Rate	Latino Graduation Rate	White Graduation Rate	Ranking of District by 1993 Population
Boston	82%	85%	68%	87%	50
Cleveland City	28%	29%	26%	23%	38
Dade County (Miami)	57%	55%	55%	70%	4
Denver County	53%	55%	36%	79%	53
Houston	52%	55%	42%	84%	6
Indianapolis	39%	44%	INS	NA	85
Los Angeles Unified	56%	56%	48%	81%	2
New York City	55%	42%	45%	80%	1

INS=Insufficient student count for calculating graduation rate; NA=Data not available

Source: *Graduation Rates in the United States*, Jay P. Greene, November 2001, revised April 2002.

[http://www.manhattan-institute.org/cr\\_baeo.pdf](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/cr_baeo.pdf)



### ADOLESCENT LITERACY INITIATIVE WOULD TARGET STRUGGLING READERS IN MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS

According to the data from the **1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress**, 26 percent of eighth graders and 23 percent of twelfth graders do not have even partial mastery of the fundamental reading skills expected at their grade levels. Assuming that these rates apply comparably to all middle and high school students, 6 million students in grades 6 through 12 are reading below basic levels.

Research shows, however, that students who receive intensive, focused literacy instruction and tutoring will graduate from high school and attend college in significantly greater numbers than those not receiving such attention. Despite these findings, few middle or high schools have a comprehensive approach to teaching literacy across the curriculum.

This fall, several school districts around the country are implementing new programs designed to improve reading. In Ohio, the **Dayton Public Schools District** will devote 2.5 hours every day to reading and other literacy activities as part of the district's new literacy initiative. More than 400 district teachers and principals have received literacy training and 24 reading coaches have been trained to work in elementary schools. Meanwhile, **Miami –Dade County Public Schools District** will expand its reading intervention plan to middle schools and high schools. The plan, already credited with boosting student performance in several low-performing elementary schools, calls for more and smaller reading classes.

In its Framework for an Excellent Education, the Alliance calls for the implementation of a national Adolescent Literacy Initiative. The Initiative would build upon Congress' and the President's commitment to early literacy intervention. The Reading First initiative now in place distributes \$5 billion over five years to states to establish high-quality, scientifically based, comprehensive reading instruction for students in kindergarten through third grade, but it is not designed to help middle and high school students.

Improving reading in early grades cannot by itself solve literacy problems at the high school level. Under the Alliance's proposed Adolescent Literacy Initiative, every high-needs middle and high school will have a literacy specialist who trains teachers across subject areas to improve students' intermediate and advanced reading and writing skills. In addition, teachers will learn to identify reading difficulties and ensure that students receive the extra help they need to become effective readers and writers and thus able to succeed in challenging high school courses. Without this intervention, most at-risk students will fail to master challenging coursework and will be at greater risk of dropping out of school.

### **“Literacy Interns” Help Improve Reading and Math Skills for Inner-City Kids**

A few years ago, Alexander McClure Elementary School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania received federal money to reduce class size. Faced with lack of space and lack of teachers, Alexander McClure chose to partner “literacy interns”—specially trained college graduates who lacked certification—with classroom teachers. Writing for the *Philadelphia Daily News*, Ronnie Polaneczky profiles the school and the gains its students are making.

As part of the program, the literacy interns were trained in the district's “balanced approach” to reading, which allows students time for both guided group and individual reading. According to McClure principal Vera Dierkes, the program works because the additional teacher in the room means that students who need extra help receive it and more advanced students are not held back by slower learners—evidenced by the fact that the number of McClure students identified as “mentally gifted” has risen from five to 42 since 1999.

The program also helps in teacher recruitment and retention in the district. At McClure, five new teachers are also former interns. Throughout the district, 102 former interns have become certified teachers. However, not everything is sunny in the city of brotherly love as Polaneczky sarcastically notes: “Literacy interns are now in elementary schools, and every indication shows their presence is a godsend. Which means—of course—that their positions are in danger of being axed.”

*Philadelphia Daily News* article: <http://www.philly.com/mld/dailynews/news/local/4084332.htm>



## ATTRACTING AND RETAINING HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS

In an effort to meet the highly qualified teacher requirement in *No Child Left Behind*, some school districts have raised class-size limits to reduce the number of teachers needed. According to *Education Week*, 56 percent of the Los Angeles school district's newly hired teachers are certified, compared with only 34 percent last year. At the same time, however, the state raised class-size limits to “[ease] the pinch on the teacher supply.” Such action by a school district would take some of the heat off finding highly qualified teachers, but it also seems to fly in the face of the long-term goal of increased student achievement.

In its new report, *Every Child a Graduate*, the Alliance calls for the implementation of a new Teacher and Principal Quality Initiative that would offer incentives and support to attract and recruit highly qualified teachers. Significant federal funds exist to help states and districts recruit and retain teachers and principals, and reform certification and licensure systems, but more needs to be done to increase the pool of talented teachers available to serve our neediest students in hard-to-staff districts such as Los Angeles.

### Alliance Recommendations to Improve Teacher Recruitment and Retention

The Alliance's Teacher and Principal Quality Initiative features a powerful incentive—a \$4,000 annual federal income tax credit—to encourage America's best teachers and principals to accept the challenge of working in high-poverty schools. The credit would go to teachers in states and school districts that are willing to increase resources dedicated to paying teachers as skilled professionals.

The Alliance Initiative also calls for federal funds to recruit beginning teachers who are highly qualified in their discipline for high-needs schools by targeting up to \$20,000 in grants to college juniors with at least a 3.4 grade point average in their major. To retain quality teachers in high-needs areas, up to \$17,500 in loan forgiveness would be offered in exchange for a commitment to teach in high-needs schools for at least five years.

Such incentives would go a long way in helping districts meet the highly qualified teacher requirement in *No Child Left Behind*—without forcing districts to make cuts in other areas that affect student achievement. Without the tools to compete against other more financially rewarding professions, districts will continue to have trouble finding quality teachers for their neediest students. According to a study by **Richard M. Ingersoll of the University of Pennsylvania**, 20 percent of teachers at high-poverty schools left teaching or moved to other schools in 1999, compared with 12.9 percent in low-poverty schools.

Teacher mentoring and induction programs are important to retain teachers to give them the support they need. School districts would be responsible for putting in place an intensive mentoring and training program for new teachers that would help them better teach high-need students. In addition, ongoing content-based professional development would be continuously available for all teachers and principals.

### **Spotlight on School Districts: New Teacher Training in Dallas and Baltimore**

The *No Child Left Behind Act* has forced many districts to be creative and develop new methods to recruit and retain teachers; but more needs to be done. In the **Dallas Independent School District**, first-year teachers leave at a rate of 31 percent. In an effort to provide teachers the support they need, the district has developed a program called “T-cubed.” Instructional coaches will model effective teaching strategies, offer assistance with classroom management, and coach in lesson design.

The **Baltimore County Public Schools District** is implementing its own program to increase teacher retention. This summer it offered more than 600 new teachers the opportunity to attend its New Teacher Summer Institute. The Institute provided four weeks of professional development. The new teachers also observed veteran teachers and interacted with students in the classroom.

*Education Week*: “City Districts Seek Teachers with Licenses”:  
<http://edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=02qualify.h22>



### **PERSONALIZED PLAN TO PREPARE STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE: New Initiative to Involve Students, Teachers, Counselors, Parents**

Beginning this school year, the **Houston Independent School District** is implementing a new program that allows teachers to track student progress and to improve parental communication. By distributing high-speed laptops to all of its teachers, the district is giving its teachers access to a “Teacher Toolbox,” which also allows teachers to view district curriculum and improve their planning and classroom instruction. New initiatives like Houston’s can allow teachers and counselors to better track individualized student progress and initiate student plans.

The Alliance is calling for a national college preparation plan that promotes student planning and support while increasing parental involvement. The plan ensures that students not only have access to the highest-quality literacy instruction and educators, but also to the courses and support structures necessary to succeed during and after high school.

Building on current federal programs, a personalized plan to prepare students for college would include the development of a six-year academic and support plan for every entering ninth grader. The plan would be facilitated by an academic counselor who would also be responsible for ensuring that students receive the services identified in the plan and transition smoothly to college or a career.

The federal government can also help fund needed college counseling and individualized student learning by increasing funding of the *GEAR UP* and *TRIO* programs. These programs have strong track records for helping disadvantaged students progress through the academic pipeline from middle school through college but serve only 10 percent to 20 percent of eligible students. Under the Framework for an Excellent Education, annual follow-up meetings would be held to make sure students remain on track and to provide an opportunity for them to catch up through extra help, academic enrichment, and other supports.

## **Personalized Plan to Prepare Students for College:**

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Similarly, before- and after-school programs—funded through the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Community Centers—extend students’ learning time beyond the regular school day and allow them to get academic tutoring and participate in enrichment activities (including music and art), mentoring, counseling, and other support services (e.g., drug or violence prevention) outside of the regular school day. Extra help would be geared toward helping low performers develop the comprehension strategies, learning methods, and study skills that more successful students have already mastered.



### **SMALL SCHOOLS: A Catalyst for Education Reform and Improvement**

In model schools around the country, personalized learning plans, reading coaches, and successful teacher recruitment initiatives are already in place. Almost without exception, the most successful programs are found in small learning communities. While a small learning community is not a “silver bullet” for education reform, it is an important tool to ensure that the Framework for an Excellent Education is successful in raising student achievement.

According to the **U.S. Department of Education**, approximately 70 percent of American high school students attend schools with enrollments of 1,000 or more students, and nearly 50 percent of high school students attend schools in which the student population is over 1,500. By expanding the current Smaller Learning Communities program, the federal government could allow millions of students to attend schools that are safer, more nurturing, and much more likely to improve student learning.

Time and again, research has found that small schools are an effective and cost-efficient way to improve student achievement and other outcomes for youth. Small schools personalize and contextualize students’ education experience and facilitate the implementation of other effective strategies. These schools are successful not *because* of their small size, but because small size allows strong principals to implement positive changes, including innovative programs, alternative teaching methods, and individualized attention for students. A growing body of research shows that small schools, defined as 400 to 800 students, combat student alienation and enable teachers to learn students’ individual cognitive and developmental needs and offer personalized assistance. In Texas, for example, 53 high schools with large concentrations of poor students are among the highest achieving (top 25 percent) in the state. Of these 53 schools, 48 have fewer than 600 students.

Although it would seem as though small schools are more expensive to operate than large schools, the added benefits of small schools appear to outweigh the costs. A 1999 report by the **National Association of Elementary School Principals** found that when calculating the costs to taxpayers per graduate, rather than by student, small schools were actually less expensive than large ones because of their lower dropout and higher graduation rates.



## **MAKING THE CASE: The Framework for an Excellent Education Pays for Itself**

Federal investment in the Framework for an Excellent Education will be recouped many times over in economic growth, enhanced tax revenues, and reduced spending on unemployment, criminal justice, and social welfare programs. But this is just a beginning, as we have the capacity to make additional gains through ongoing educational improvements.

Looking back at history, the Morrill Act in 1862 and the GI Bill in 1944 both dramatically increased the nation's productivity by bringing more people into higher education. Today, America cannot maintain its position as the world's strongest economy without a greater attention to the needs of our middle and high school students. If we were to raise U.S. workers' literacy levels we would increase the productivity of our workforce by increasing the pool of our workforce. For example, if our literacy levels were the same as those in Sweden (where the percentage of workers at the lowest literacy level is a third of the U.S. percentage), our gross domestic product would rise by \$463 billion.

According to Jay Greene's report for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in September 2000, in Michigan alone, businesses spend approximately \$40 million a year to teach their workers how to read, write, and perform basic math operations. When including the cost of technology used to compensate for employees' lack of basic skills, the price of correcting the shortcomings of workers who leave high school without basic skills in Michigan is about \$222 million each year.

### **“Squeezing Education Funding Out of a ‘Lame Duck’”**

Writing for the **Council of Great City Schools' *Urban Educator***, Jeff Simering, Director of Legislative Services, says Congress will most likely not finish this year's education spending bill before the upcoming elections:

“It is nearly a foregone conclusion that the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress will re-convene in a lame duck session after the November elections to complete the annual federal funding cycle. With the economic downturn, major corporate bankruptcies, declining retirement investments, and a ballooning federal deficit, no one wants to be blamed for any more bad news. And, with school budgets being cut due to declining state and local revenue, the offer of less federal education funding than provided in the past two years is not a popular message. The easiest solution appears to be put off funding decisions until after the elections.”

To read the complete article, visit:

[www.cgcs.org/urbaneducator/2002/sept2\\_vol\\_11\\_no\\_6\\_article\\_10/sept2\\_vol\\_11\\_no\\_6\\_article\\_10.html](http://www.cgcs.org/urbaneducator/2002/sept2_vol_11_no_6_article_10/sept2_vol_11_no_6_article_10.html)

**Straight A's: An Update on Public Education** is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events both in Washington, D.C., 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 non-profit organization working to make it possible for America's 6 million at-risk middle and high school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.