



ALLIANCE FOR  
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

# Straight A's

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## U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION HOSTS HIGH SCHOOL CONFERENCE: Paige Offers Strong Rhetoric, But No New Initiatives

*“Unless improvements are made, American students will not be competitive with students in other countries, dooming future generations to less opportunity, greater levels of poverty, and further disparities in health status. Our children and grandchildren’s world will be even more complex, inter-related, and global. Can anyone earnestly say that our current education system is preparing them for this world? In the future, I fear only the well-educated will have the necessary skills, insight, and imagination to succeed. Those who are unprepared will sit on the sidelines, confronting poverty, dead-end jobs, and hopelessness. They will find little choice and much despair. The well-educated will live in a world of their own choosing; the poorly educated will wander in the shadows.”*

Secretary Rod Paige  
U.S. Department of Education  
October 8, 2003

“To put it bluntly, our high school system is not serving some kids well. We are facing an unrecognized educational crisis in this country,” **U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige** said to a crowd of 700 delegates at the National High School Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C. Given such strong words, the remedies offered were disappointing.

“By the time they reach 12th-grade, only one in six African Americans and one in five Hispanics can read proficiently,” the Secretary noted. However, he made no mention of the need for an adolescent literacy program for the six million students in middle and high school who read below a basic level—a recommendation that the Alliance has put forward and asked the Administration to embrace. Such a program could ensure that every high-needs middle and high school will have a literacy specialist who trains teachers across subject areas to improve the reading and writing skills of all students. In *Every Child a Graduate*, the Alliance reported that, according to recent research, those who receive intensive, focused literacy instruction and tutoring graduate from high school and attend college in significantly greater numbers than those who do not receive such attention.

Paige also noted that America’s students consistently under perform compared to their counterparts throughout the world. He stressed that the country needs to expect more from its high schools and pointed to a report by the **Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)** that found that American students read, write, and do math at rates lower than students in Asia and Europe. The report also found that high school graduation rates in America fall below the OECD average. “The on-time graduation rates at our inner city high schools are shockingly low,” Paige said. “At about half of the high schools in our 35 largest cities, less than half of ninth-graders graduate four years later. We can no longer close our eyes and ignore the children who are being left behind.” Nevertheless, the Administration has not

## **U.S. Department of Education Hosts High School Conference**

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proposed a graduation plan for every student or academic counselors who could help students develop a plan that meets their needs and identifies courses, additional learning opportunities (e.g., tutoring), and necessary health and social services. Nor has the Administration proposed expanding the Smaller Learning Communities program, which would allow innovative principals to implement positive changes, including innovative programs, alternative teaching methods, and individualized attention for students. All these research-based recommendations were made in *Every Child a Graduate*, released in September 2002.

### **Paige Announces New Leadership Initiative for High Schools**

The one-day leadership summit was an opportunity for state teams of educators and policymakers and researchers to hear about local innovative and effective strategies for transforming high schools. At the conference, Paige announced a new leadership initiative to encourage states and local school districts to improve their high schools. The initiative, Preparing America's Future, has four themes:

- Setting high expectations and accountability for results
- Creating options and engaging students
- Fostering world quality teaching and school leadership; and
- Making smooth transition into postsecondary education, training, and careers.

He emphasized that we have spent too much time on structural reforms like block scheduling. "Too often," he said, "structural reforms minimize or overlook the need for improving the quality of instruction. We must pay attention to factors like time on task, opportunities to practice, providing quality feedback, and using meaningful assessments of student achievement."

He noted the success of two small federal programs currently underway to help high school students graduate prepared for college, the State Scholars Initiative and the Advanced Placement program. He announced \$11 million in 22 new grants through the Advanced Placement Incentives program to increase the number of low-income students who take advanced courses. He also announced \$2.4 million in grants to expand the State Scholars Initiative—a business-led effort to better prepare students for success after high school.

However, when discussing an expanded role for the federal government in helping school districts improve their high schools, Paige seemed to prefer a hands-off approach: "For the leaders assembled today, I want to encourage you in your work today to develop a bold new vision for shaping the way high schools operate. This Department is committed to providing you the best information and support."

Paige acknowledged that *No Child Left Behind* offers little in the way of high school reform, but stopped short of calling for legislation aimed at high schools. "We know that the foundation for academic success begins early in life, which helps explain the focus of the No Child Left Behind law. However, we also know that much of the gains made early in school are lost in high school."

Learn more about Secretary Paige's High School Initiative and access materials from the conference, including a complete transcript at:  
<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/hsinit/index.html>

Read the complete text of Secretary Paige's speech at:  
<http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/2003/10/10082003.html>

### **Secretaries of Education, Labor Announce New Internet Tools To Ease Transition from High School to College, Career**

**U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige** announced a new Web site that will help guide parents and students through the college application and financial aid process. The site, Student Aid on the Web, offers everything from assessing a student's career interests to helping apply for financial aid. The site is available at:  
<http://www.studentaid.ed.gov>

**U.S. Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao** also appeared at the high school summit and announced the Career Voyages Web site. The site is a collaborative effort of the Education and Labor Departments and will help parents and young people learn about high-growth industries and occupations, as well as the skills needed for these jobs. The Career Voyages site is available at <http://www.careervoyages.gov>



### **IMPLEMENTATION OF *NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT* MEETS WITH OBSTACLES AT STATE AND LOCAL LEVEL**

With thousands of schools "needing improvement" nationwide, parents, teachers, and citizens around the country are beginning to realize the implications of the *No Child Left Behind Act*. According to a recent article in the *Washington Post*, the *No Child Left Behind Act*, one of the Administration's signature pieces of legislation, could come back to haunt the President and congressional Republicans during the 2004 elections. Nationwide, voters are opening their newspapers and discovering as many as half of the schools in their state are being labeled "in need of improvement."

As reported by the *Washington Post*, David Winston, a pollster for congressional Republicans, warned that Democrats have been able to pull ahead of Republicans on the education issue in recent polls. What was once a 50-50 split between Republicans and Democrats in January 2002 when *NCLB* was signed into law has grown to a 50-36 advantage for Democrats. According to the *Post* article, this advantage may play a key role in the 2004 presidential election in swing states such as Florida, Tennessee, Missouri, and West Virginia "where nearly half or more of schools are not meeting the new benchmarks and where a few thousand voters could decide which presidential candidate wins each state in 2004."

Earlier this year, during the **National Governors Association's** winter meetings in Washington, D.C., Republican and Democratic governors alike asked for help in meeting demands for stepped-up homeland security, financing the increasing costs of special education, and implementing the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)*. While most governors praise the law's intent, they stress that, without additional support from the federal government, they will be unable to truly "leave no child behind"—especially during this time of state budget shortfalls which often require cuts in education.

## **Implementation of *No Child Left Behind* Meets with Obstacles at Local Level**

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The *Post* article uses West Virginia as an example of how *NCLB* and the federal tax cuts could affect the 2004 presidential election. Because the state links its tax rates to the federal government's tax rate, President Bush's recent round of tax cuts have drained revenue from the state treasury. As a result, some local governments have been forced to raise property taxes to pay for education.

According to **West Virginia Gov. Bob Wise (D)**, the state has been a "poster child" for emulating the President's policy at the state level. For education, it gave quick approval to its testing plan and shifted money around to fund it. It also "gave [its] citizens full advantage of the Bush tax cuts even though the state took a hit," says Wise. As a result, state officials say that the state's revenue has dropped by about \$60 million during this fiscal year. At the same time, teachers and parents are wondering why 45 percent of the state's schools have been labeled "in need of improvement" and why more has not been done to address this problem.

### **New Jersey Governor Faults *NCLB* Implementation for Listing Top Schools "In Need of Improvement"**

**New Jersey Gov. James E. McGreevey (D)** has also asked for changes to the way that *NCLB* is being implemented. In a letter to U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige, Gov. McGreevey said the current implementation is highly flawed and leads to unfairly characterizing successful schools as failing, even those among the best in the nation. "As we have seen with the initial review of [adequate yearly progress] reports from states throughout the country," he wrote, "many quality schools, including schools in New Jersey with proven records of student proficiency, are being falsely characterized as 'in need of improvement.'"

In his letter, Gov. McGreevey specifically mentioned Ridgewood High School, "one of the finest schools in New Jersey, let alone the nation," which appeared on the "in need of improvement" list—despite its 1,200 average SAT score—because "three special needs students did not take a required test."

Some top suburban schools in Illinois are in a similar position. When test results are released next month, it is expected that Evanston Township and Oak Park and River Forest will appear on the state's "in need of improvement" list. While these two schools have high scores overall, students in one of the subgroups specified by *NCLB* failed to meet state standards in math or reading. Under the law, schools must break down test scores by race, income level, gender, disability, and ethnicity. Schools are then judged by the progress of each group, rather than on an average score of all students.

### **New National Group Calls on Federal Officials to Consider *NCLB* Rewrite**

The President and Congress have also drawn fire from a newly formed group of educators and civic leaders which is calling on Congress to rewrite *NCLB* by focusing less on punishing schools and more on outlining specific steps to help them improve. The group, **Citizens for Effective Schools**, notes that many states have chosen to lower their improvement goals and avoid sanctions rather than making systemic changes.

In Michigan, the group notes in a letter to Congress, officials have lowered their standards so that the percentage of students needed to pass a test for a school to meet Adequate Yearly Progress is now only 42 percent, much lower than the 75 percent previously required. Texas lowered the minimum passing score on its reading test. Twenty states have reduced the percentage of students who need to reach proficiency within the next few years in favor of sharp increases farther down the road.

Dan Langan, a spokesman for the U.S. Department of Education told the *New York Times* that there were “no plans to amend the law.” He also noted that states and districts could adopt the changes proposed by the Citizens for Effective Schools without running afoul of *NCLB*.

In the last issue of *Straight A's*, we reported that mayors—often the highest-ranking elected official in many communities—commonly find themselves first in line when it comes to accountability for a school’s performance. Now, that pressure is rising up the political ladder as governors see large numbers of their state’s schools on the “in need of improvement list.” Ultimately, although the presidential election is still over a year away, many political insiders fully expect the *No Child Left Behind Act* to play a large role in the 2004 election.

“Education Law May Hurt Bush” available at:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A17509-2003Oct12.html>

“Education Group Calls for Revised Law” available at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/16/education/16SCHO.html>



### **NEW YORK CITY VOTERS TO CONSIDER CLASS-SIZE ISSUE: Rising Enrollments, *NCLB* Transfer Provisions Lead to Extreme Overcrowding**

Rising enrollments, combined with a new transfer option in *NCLB* that allows students to transfer out of failing schools, are causing classrooms in New York City to burst at the seams with 33 to 34 students per class in elementary schools, and five or more extra students per class in middle and high schools. In an effort to fight ever-increasing class size, a group composed of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), parents, and advocacy organizations successfully petitioned for a referendum on the issue that, if successful, would create a commission to decide whether class-size limits should be written into city law.

Essentially, the Nov. 4 ballot question asks New York City residents if they want to create a Charter Revenue Commission that would examine the class-size issue. The panel could then ask voters if they wanted to amend the city charter to include a limit on class size. In *Campaign for Fiscal Equity v. the State of New York*, the New York Court of Appeals has ruled that students in New York City were being denied their constitutional right to a sound basic education because their class sizes were found to be much larger than other classes around the state. According to a UFT survey of local union chapter leaders, more than 9,000 classes exceeded the class-size limits that were outlined in the union’s contract, which range from 25 students in kindergarten to 34 in high school.

## **New York City Voters to Consider Class-Size Issue**

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Opponents of the class-size movement point to Florida as an example of what could happen in New York City with a cap on class size. In Florida, state officials are struggling to meet a voter-approved class-size amendment that restricts school class size. Critics claim that the amendment will eat away too much money from an already thin Florida state budget as well as force the state to put under-qualified teachers into some classrooms. The amendment requires that by 2010 Florida's classrooms be limited to 18 children in pre-kindergarten through third grade, 22 children in grades four through eight, and 25 children in high school classes.

Supporters of the class-size limit argue that small schools and small classes are an effective and cost-efficient way to ensure more individualized attention and improvements in student achievement, especially for disadvantaged students. They also argue that smaller learning communities facilitate relationships between students and teachers, foster greater parental involvement, and result in fewer disciplinary problems.



### **A TALE OF TWO STATES: Alabama and Oregon Head in Opposite Directions in Funding Education**

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...” With states collectively facing the worst budget crisis since World War II, most state officials think they're facing the worst of times. Two states, Alabama and Oregon, are examples of how states are choosing different methods for dealing with the education issue. In soundly defeating **Alabama Gov. Bob Riley's (R)** tax referendum, Alabama's citizens have chosen a road that leads to cuts in funding for textbooks, teacher professional development, and other school-related items. Oregon lawmakers, however, chose the road less traveled and approved a 13 percent increase in education funding. The increase will be paid for in part by a \$792 million tax increase that is part of the \$11.6 billion state budget for fiscal years 2004 and 2005.

#### **Without Tax Increases, Alabama Forced to Cut Education Programs**

Less than a month after the defeat of his tax referendum, Alabama Gov. Riley signed a new budget that increases education funding by \$12 million (1 percent) to \$2.91 billion. The move left many educators pondering what might have been had the tax referendum been successful. Instead of an extra \$1.2 billion, much of which would have been designated for education programs, Alabama's new budget included a \$36.8 million cut (88 percent) in funding for new textbooks as well as a complete elimination of funding for teacher professional development and school technology. By tapping into a rainy-day fund, the state was able to postpone laying-off teachers and support staff for now, but it may have to revisit the issue during the next school year.

#### **Oregon Raises Taxes for Education, Voter Referendum Still a Possibility**

After a record-breaking 227-day legislative session, **Gov. Theodore R. Kulongoski (D)** and Oregon lawmakers were able to come to agreement on a state budget that provided a significant increase for education programs. For fiscal years 2004 and 2005, K-12 education programs will

receive \$5.2 billion, a \$600 million increase. For Gov. Kulongoski, who was opposed to a tax increase in January, the bill was the only way to avoid a shortened school year and painful cuts in valuable programs. “I signed this bill as a last resort, because I am committed to providing all of Oregon’s children with a full school year.”

Oregon’s schoolchildren, however, are not completely out of the woods yet. Opponents of the tax increase are trying to force a referendum that would allow state voters to decide on the tax-hike legislation in February. Tax opponents would need to gather 50,420 signatures by Nov. 25 to put the referendum on the ballot. If voters were to repeal the tax measure, the state budget would lose approximately \$550 million in revenue. Of that total, over \$400 million would come from education programs.



### **ADOLESCENT LITERACY COACHES CATCH ON IN ST. LOUIS: Grades Improve for Middle School Students Under New Program**

The private management team that runs the St. Louis public school system has grabbed headlines in the last few months for closing schools, laying off employees, and outsourcing many district operations. Meanwhile, a group of 93 literacy coaches in St. Louis, one for each school, has quietly helped seventh-graders make dramatic improvements on the state reading tests.

The literacy coach program has been in place in some schools for the past two years, this is the first year it is expected to be in place district-wide. According to an article in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* by Jake Wagman, the “push for literacy is what the management team is offering as a scholastic blueprint for better test scores and capable graduates.” Emphasizing literacy across the curriculum, literacy coaches observe and work with teachers in all subject areas, from math and science to English, music, and chemistry. “The same practices that make you good readers are the same practices that will make you a successful math student,” Pat Burton, one of the district’s literacy coaches, told the *Post-Dispatch* on Oct. 12.

Teachers and literacy coaches sometimes go on “learning walks” to sit in on a fellow teacher and observe how he or she weaves literacy instruction into the lesson. Coaches also find time to work with students individually. When sitting in on a class, a literacy coach often keeps the results of students’ reading test scores in front of him or her in order to pay special attention to students who need additional help.

The Literacy Initiative underway in St. Louis includes reading tests every 10 weeks and encourages students to read 25 books during the school year. Although the program is beginning its first year in many schools, students in some schools where the program is already in place are beginning to show improvement. At Langston Middle School, 30 percent of the seventh-graders scored proficient or advanced on the state’s communication arts test this year, an increase of 26 percent from 1999.

**Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress** 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.