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Public Education Policy And Progress



PRESIDENT CALLS FOR NEW EDUCATION PLAN: “Jobs for the 21st Century” to Provide Extra Help for Middle and High School Students

In his State of the Union address last week, President Bush announced a new, comprehensive program designed to boost job skills for the new millennium by improving high school and post-secondary education. Named Jobs for the 21st Century, the President’s plan proposes over \$500 million in new funding for education and job training programs.

“Many of the fastest-growing occupations require strong math and science preparation, and training beyond the high school level,” Bush said. “We must ensure that older students and adults can gain the skills they need to find work now.”

The way to enhance American job skills for a changing economy, the President declared, is to better prepare high school students to enter higher education or the workforce. Jobs for the 21st Century will “provide extra help to middle and high school students who fall behind in reading and math.” According to the White House, the program will provide \$100 million for a Striving Readers Initiative that will promote effective reading interventions for struggling secondary students. An additional \$120 million will go to accelerate the mathematics performance of low-achieving students, an expansion of the mathematics and science program authorized by *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB).

Education leaders have long voiced concern that too many secondary students lack the basic literacy skills they need to successfully graduate from high school. Last month, 30 organizations and 170 individuals sent a letter to President Bush urging that he “increase dramatically the federal education investment in (his) FY2005 budget proposal to a level sufficient to address the needs of the eight million students currently reading below basic levels in grades four through 12.” (The full text of the letter is available at: <http://www.all4ed.org/press/PresidentLetter.html>.)

The President’s proposal falls short of that goal but opens the door to a new federal role in helping struggling readers of all ages. “Many students are at risk of dropping out of school in part because of deficient reading skills,” the GOP conference press office stated. “High school graduates are not entering college and the workforce with the skills they need to compete in a changing economy.”

In addition to funding for reading and math, Jobs for the 21st Century provides \$28 million to expand Advanced Placement programs in low-income schools, \$40 million to recruit math and science professionals to teach part time, and \$12 million to fund the State Scholars Program, which encourages high school students to take rigorous courses in preparation for college.

President Calls for New Education Plan

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The administration also recommended \$250 million for community colleges that partner with local employers in high-demand job sectors, and it seeks to increase funding for Pell Grants for college students by \$33 million. In exchange for participating in the State Scholars Program, Pell recipients may receive an additional \$1,000 per year in their first two years of college.

“By all these actions,” Bush concluded, “we will help more and more Americans join in the growing prosperity of our country.”

With the announcement of Jobs for the 21st Century, President Bush has turned a national spotlight on America’s middle and high schools. His new initiative appears to be an effort that builds upon and expands *NCLB* to improve the quality of our country’s secondary schools. The details of the President’s proposal will be released next month as part of his budget request for fiscal year 2005.

A detailed description of Jobs for the 21st Century is available at:
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/01/20040121.html>



TWO-YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND: Perspectives from Paige, Kennedy, the Public, Superintendents, and Principals

January 8 marked the two-year anniversary of the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)*. Depending on which report one reads, the public’s awareness of *NCLB* is either quite high (87 percent—Americans for Better Education poll) or still relatively low (58 percent—National Education Association poll). In both cases, most of the general public appears to be supportive of the law and in favor of greater funding for *NCLB* from the federal government.

Appearing at an elementary school in Tennessee, President Bush stressed the gains that students around the country have made in reading and math scores. He specifically mentioned higher eighth-grade math scores and fourth-grade reading scores, but also took a moment to paint the importance of *NCLB* in the historical context of education reform:

It is legislation which I would call historic, because for the first time, the federal government is spending more money, and now asking for results. See, in the past it used to be we would send a check and hope something happened. And now the federal government is sending checks, at record amounts, I might add, for Title I students and teacher training and reading programs. But we’re now saying, listen, we trust you. We trust . . . teachers to accomplish a mission; why don’t you just show us that you are.

For **U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige**, the anniversary seemed to resonate on a more personal level. In an address at the American Enterprise Institute, he spoke about his upbringing amidst segregation in Mississippi, his limited options to get a higher education, and widespread violence against minorities. His speech drew parallels between the importance of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case, the two-tiered education system that still exists in our nation, and the role of *NCLB* in ensuring that every child gets a world-class education.

The No Child Left Behind Act is the next logical step to Brown. It addresses the latent segregation, de facto apartheid, that's emerging in some of our educational settings. Like Brown, No Child Left Behind faced resistance. But if we have the will this law will have a powerful and healing impact on our society. . . this country does not yet provide equal opportunities for millions of children. That is why the No Child Left Behind Act is so important. After 50 years we still have a lot of work to do.

Secretary Paige also took the opportunity to strike back against some of *NCLB*'s critics, using the *Brown* decision as a benchmark:

Because of the powerful sweep of this change, this revolution, there are some who resist it. And that's to be expected. The resistance to Brown was massive. It took decades and we're still moving forward. And so the resistance to the No Child Left Behind Act is to be expected. But those who fought Brown were on the wrong side of history. Just like those who fight No Child Left Behind will be judged so

Read the complete speech at: <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/2004/01/01072004.html>

Democrats Express Frustration with Underfunding and *NCLB* Implementation Issues

In a letter to Secretary Paige, the two leading Democratic negotiators of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, **Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA)** and **U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA)**, were joined by the Democratic members of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee (HELP), in outlining what they saw as the unrealized potential of *NCLB*. In addition to noting a \$7.5 billion funding shortfall, the letter expressed disappointment with the delay by the U.S. Department of Education in releasing regulations and guidance for the act. It also listed concerns with key policy areas including the unfulfilled promise of a highly qualified teacher in every classroom and it took the administration task for allowing schools to "claim academic progress and increasing test scores while ignoring high dropout rates."

In a separate statement, Sen. Kennedy stressed that *NCLB* was a good piece of legislation that has largely gotten a bad rap because of poor implementation and lack of funding:

The No Child Left Behind Act is still the right reform for our schools, requiring higher standards, better teachers, and real accountability for schools for the performance of all children. But in the two years since the No Child Left Behind Act was passed, the Bush Administration has cut its funding, reneged on promised resources for better teachers and smaller classes, and worked to divert millions of dollars to private school vouchers. . . While President Bush deserves an "A grade" for helping a bipartisan Congress shepherd a solid school reform plan into law, his follow through gets a "D minus" mark. It's way too soon for the "Mission Accomplished" banner on No Child Left Behind.

The complete letter from Senate HELP Committee Democrats and Rep. George Miller is available at: <http://edworkforce.house.gov/democrats/paigencblletter.html>

Polling Data Reveals a Generally Supportive Public

According to recent polling data from the **National Education Association (NEA)**, the American public is generally supportive of the *No Child Left Behind Act*. The poll found that, after hearing a description of *NCLB*'s goals, 55 percent of participants believe the law will have a positive impact while 37 percent believe the impact will be negative. However, the poll also found that 63 percent of voters believe the federal government should increase funding for public schools, while only 7 percent support a decrease in federal education funding.

Two-Year Anniversary of No Child Left Behind

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A poll by **Americans for Better Education** found that 54 percent of the American public has a favorable impression of *NCLB*, compared to 23 percent unfavorable. The survey also asked participants what they thought was the most important factor in improving the quality of education in America's schools. Smaller class size was the factor most respondents chose (37 percent), followed by teacher training and testing (33 percent), higher teacher pay (26 percent), higher academic standards (25 percent), and increasing funding for schools (20 percent).

Superintendents and Principals Weigh In on *NCLB*

Public Agenda surveyed principals and superintendents from across the country and found that school leaders strongly support standards and accountability, but they have "complicated, ambivalent feelings" about the *No Child Left Behind Act*. According to *Rolling Up Their Sleeves: Superintendents and Principals Talk About What's Needed to Fix Public Schools*, 93 percent of superintendents and 88 percent of principals say their district has experienced "an enormous increase in responsibilities and mandates without getting the resources necessary to fulfill them." Almost all school leaders took issue with a lack of funding, with 89 percent of superintendents and 88 percent of principals calling the law an "unfunded mandate."

Despite these concerns, superintendents and principals admit that *NCLB* has brought about positive changes in their schools. For example, 83 percent of superintendents and 75 percent of principals report they are "more focused on curriculum, teaching, mentoring and professional development than ever before." They also report that their districts have been making real efforts to close the achievement gap between minority and white students.

Rolling Up Their Sleeves is available at:

http://www.publicagenda.org/research/research_reports_details.cfm?list=9



TELLING THE WHOLE TRUTH (OR NOT): New Reports from the Education Trust Shed Light on Reporting Highly Qualified Teachers and Graduation Rates

In its recent reports, *Telling the Whole Truth (or Not) About Highly Qualified Teachers* and *Telling the Whole Truth (or Not) About High School Graduation Rates*, the Education Trust reveals wide-spread "contradictions and inconsistencies" in the state-reported data on teacher quality and high school graduation rates required by *No Child Left Behind*. (Both reports are available at: <http://www2.edtrust.org/EdTrust/Press+Room/tell+the+truth.htm>). Additionally, the organization asserts that the U.S. Department of Education has not provided the leadership and enforcement necessary to produce accurate data. According to **Kati Haycock, Director of the Education Trust**, "Many states seem to have taken advantage of the department's lax oversight to choose calculation methods that portray a rosier picture than external sources suggest."

In response to the Education Trust reports, **Gene Hickok, Acting U.S. Deputy Secretary of Education**, issued a statement on the department's role in collecting data on teacher quality and high school dropouts:

I strongly disagree with the conclusions of the Education Trust's two recent reports. . . [The Department has] worked diligently, conscientiously, and daily with the states on their data collection efforts. . . These data empower parents to hold their school systems and states accountable, which is why we have treated this information with such importance and urgency. Any conclusion otherwise is misinformed and, quite simply, wrong. While we always welcome outside scrutiny of the Department's work, sadly it seems others find it much easier to throw bricks than to be constructive and build the house. (The complete statement is available at: <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2003/12/12222003.html>).

In its teacher quality report, *Telling the Whole Truth (or Not) About Highly Qualified Teachers*, the Education Trust outlines the importance of teacher content knowledge on student achievement and reveals that many states do not pay sufficient attention to this element in their teacher quality standards. This issue affects students in high-poverty schools most significantly. In high-poverty schools, 41 percent of classes are taught by a teacher without a major in the subject, compared to 25 percent in low-poverty schools. The report points out that while no state has the perfect definition of a highly qualified teacher, some states (Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Mississippi, New Mexico, Ohio, and Tennessee) appear to have made a “good faith effort” toward reflecting the necessary depth and breadth of teacher content knowledge in their standards. Meanwhile, 17 states do not currently include subject matter content as a criterion for secondary certification.

Telling the Whole Truth (or Not) About High School Graduation Rates, outlines inconsistencies among states in measuring graduation rates. These differences result in widely fluctuating graduation rates among states. They also often lead to an understatement the severity of the dropout problem. As a means of standardization, the Education Trust uses methodology developed by **Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute**, which compares the number of students in eighth grade in a given year to the number of graduates reported five years later. Comparing the results using this methodology with state self-reported results, the report reveals that in many states dropout rates are drastically underestimated. In four states the difference exceeded 20 percent. Additionally, state reported graduation rates for Latino and African-American students were often particularly misleading, with eight states reporting graduation rates that diverged from the Greene estimate by 20 to 25 percentage points.

The inaccuracy of the state data outlined in both of the Education Trust reports is disappointing. Teacher quality and graduation rates are two measures required by *NCLB*, which are meant to provide an accurate assessment of student progress and to establish a baseline to measure the improvement and needs of each state's education system. Without accurate data, states and the U.S. Department of Education will be less able to identify areas of need, ultimately making it more difficult for every student to succeed.

Another new report on graduation rates, *The Education Pipeline in the United States, 1970-2000*, examines enrollment and graduation rates nationally and by state and found that over the last thirty years the rate at which students disappear between grades 9 and 10 has tripled. According to one of the authors, Dr. Walter Haney, “The findings are quite disturbing. Despite all of the high-sounding rhetoric about reforming our schools, the data on enrollment and graduation demonstrate that many states hold students back in 9th grade, encourage dropping out, and graduate a declining percentage of students.”

The complete report is available from the National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy at: <http://www.bc.edu/research/nbetpp/reports.html>.

Expert Panel to Review High School Dropout and Graduation Rates

The **U.S. Department of Education** recently announced the formation of a panel of experts to review the methods for reporting high school dropouts and on-time graduates.

“There is no question that we must focus our efforts on helping students graduate from high schools,” said **U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige**. “One of the first things we need to do is look at the varying definitions, standards and tracking systems throughout the country to gain a better understanding of the problem so that we can tackle it head-on.”

A department press release about the panel noted that the number of diplomas awarded represents only about two-thirds of ninth-graders who entered public schools four years earlier. The release also raised the possibility that there may be substantial differences in the way states define a dropout. This discrepancy is difficult to quantify because there is no data about the degree to which states vary in their definitions of students who drop out, chronically truant students, and students who moved to another state.

Using current statistics, the expert panel will examine the inconsistencies in existing measures and make recommendations for improving data collection and estimation procedures.

To read the complete release and see the panel of experts, visit:
<http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2003/12/12192003.html>



Florida Gov. Jeb Bush Announces Plan to Create Reading Program for Middle School Students

Appearing at Carver Middle School in Orange County, **Florida Gov. Jeb Bush (R)** announced the creation of a Middle Grades Reform Act that will put reading coaches in 240 middle schools throughout the state and provide more rigorous middle school classes to prepare students for high school curricula.

Governor Bush’s plan provides a ray of hope for the 49 percent of Florida’s middle school students who cannot read at grade level. Under the initiative, the state would spend \$13 million on reading coaches for middle schools that have large numbers of struggling students. The act would also require schools to work with sixth-graders reading below grade level on a “personalized success plan,” which would detail how the school will help improve a student’s skills. Additionally, middle schools that have more than 25 percent of students reading below grade level would have to develop a “rigorous reading requirement” as part of their annual school-improvement plans.

Bush’s plan comes at a time of increased emphasis on adolescent literacy in secondary schools. The governor also asked the Florida Legislature to provide \$21.4 million in additional funding to expand his Just Read, Florida! program beyond elementary schools. The program is a statewide, comprehensive, coordinated reading initiative aimed at helping every student become a successful, independent reader with reading skills at or above grade level by the year 2012.

The governor’s visit to Carver Middle School highlighted its two-year-old reading program. The school hired seven reading teachers to work with struggling readers. Additionally, the entire teaching staff participated in professional development classes to learn literacy strategies and to learn how to incorporate literacy into their regular class curriculum. Today, the percentage of Carver eighth-graders reading at grade level has increased from 14 percent to 24 percent.



MORE PAY FOR BETTER WORK: Louis Gerstner's Teaching Commission Calls for Action to Overhaul the Teaching Profession

In January, **The Teaching Commission**, a bipartisan panel of national leaders in education, government, business, and philanthropy, called for a new compact with teachers to fundamentally change the way they are paid, assessed, trained, and supported. The new report, *Teaching at Risk: A Call to Action*, makes four bold suggestions to improve the quality of America's teaching profession and calls for the hiring of 2 million new teachers in the next decade.

"The quality of teachers in our schools affects every aspect of our society, from jobs to national security," said the chair of The Teaching Commission, former IBM chairman Louis V. Gerstner Jr. "The nation will not continue to lead or to create new jobs if we persist in viewing teaching – the profession that makes all other professions possible – as a second-rate occupation."

Teaching at Risk highlights the chronic problems schools face in hiring high-quality teachers. Too many teachers do not have academic majors or minors in the subjects they teach. Too many poor and minority students do not have access to the best teachers. And too many schools, especially urban and high-poverty schools, do not have an adequate supply of quality teachers due to inadequate funds and poor working conditions.

"These systemic problems prevent teachers from achieving their goals and mire educators and their students in the quicksand of the status quo," the report concludes. "Given these challenges, it is no surprise that half of all new teachers quit after a few years, and that our students are not achieving as much as we'd like," said Gerstner.

To overcome such obstacles, the commission makes four recommendations:

1. **Transform How Teachers are Paid:** *Increase all teachers' pay by 10 percent. Tie compensation to student performance. Develop career advancement structures, including pay raises, for master and mentor teachers.*
2. **Revamp Teacher Education:** *Raise entrance requirements for teacher preparation programs. Make academic content more substantive. Promote teaching as a career for top students across the university. Attach federal funding to measured success of training programs.*
3. **Improve or Overhaul State Licensing and Certification Requirements:** *Raise passing scores for existing certification exams. Replace low-level competency tests with more rigorous ones. Streamline the bureaucracy of the licensing process to attract a wide range of candidates.*
4. **Empower Principals to be Better School Leaders:** *Give principals more input in personnel decisions. Ensure that principals provide teachers with mentoring and professional development that improves instruction.*

The complete report is available at: <http://www.theteachingcommission.org/>

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 nonprofit organization working to make it possible for America's six million at-risk middle and high school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.



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