



ALLIANCE FOR  
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

# StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **FOUR MORE YEARS: Bush to Focus on High Schools During Second Term**

Education was not as extensively discussed by the candidates during the recent presidential campaign as many in the education world might have liked, despite the assertions of both President George W. Bush and Senator John F. Kerry that actions to improve the public education system and expand access to college would be critical components of their administrations. With the election now behind us, however, President Bush has once again assured Americans that he intends to concentrate his educational focus in his second term on the reform of America's high schools.

"No Child Left Behind is already beginning to show results in elementary reading and math scores, but President Bush also wants to ensure that all high school students will be better prepared to enter higher education or the workforce," reads *Education: The Promise of America*, a new policy paper posted on the White House website. It notes that "today's middle and high school students did not have the chance to benefit from the reforms of the No Child Left Behind Act in elementary school, and many of these students need additional help to graduate from high school and enter college or the workforce prepared to succeed."

### **\$200 Million for Striving Readers**

Over the past several months, the president has outlined several new initiatives to help prepare students for high school and beyond. For example, he proposed including \$200 million for the Striving Readers initiative in his fiscal 2006 budget, an amount that would double the request he made in his fiscal 2005 budget. The request is currently pending, part of the 2005 appropriations process that Congress hopes to complete when it returns later this month for a lame-duck session. Fiscal 2005 funding for the Striving Readers program, when and if approved, will be available through competitive grants to "develop, implement, and evaluate effective reading interventions for middle or high school students reading significantly below grade level."

Research has shown 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. The Striving Readers initiative is designed to help middle and high school students who are having difficulty reading at grade level. Depending on the level of funding approved by Congress, the initiative could serve as many as two hundred school districts in the 2005–06 school year.

## **Bush Promises to Focus on High Schools During Second Term**

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These demonstration grants will help to identify model programs and will further develop an understanding of effective interventions for adolescents through the evaluations of these promising practices that will be conducted as part of the initiative. However, it is at best a small first step toward improving the literacy levels of the two-thirds of American high school students who are not proficient readers. The president's proposed increased funding of \$200 million will advance the program's impact, but it will still fall far short of addressing the needs of the more than eight million students in grades four through twelve who currently read at "below basic" levels on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). These students need and deserve a commitment from the administration and Congress that is at least comparable to that given to Reading First, the program that supports improved literacy for students in the early grades, which received \$1 billion in fiscal 2004.

In the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress, efforts were underway to develop a federal role that would support older students who struggle to read at grade level. The Pathways for All Students to Succeed (PASS) Act (S. 1554) was introduced last year by **Senator Patty Murray (D-WA)** and would have created a \$1 billion grant program to establish research-based literacy instruction in all academic classes for students in grades six through twelve. Under the program, grants would have provided resources for each secondary school to hire a school-based literacy coach, who would give ongoing support to help teachers incorporate literacy across the curriculum, assess student progress, assist with diagnostic tests, and work with school leadership to institute a school-based literacy plan. In the House, **Representatives Ruben Hinojosa (D-TX)** and **Susan Davis (D-CA)** included a similar proposal in their Graduation for All Act (H.R. 3085). Both bills expire at the close of the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress and would need to be reintroduced when the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress convenes in January.

### **\$200 Million for "Performance Plans"**

The president also proposed the establishment of a new \$200 million fund for states to encourage schools to develop performance plans, based on eighth-grade data, for entering high school students. The proposed program would include periodic classroom-based assessment of individual students to determine student progress and possible suggestions for remedial work, and would be developed with input from parents. Both PASS and Graduation for All have components that would help students develop graduation plans and identify the courses and support services they need to graduate.

### **Better Assessments with New High School Tests**

As it is currently written, the No Child Left Behind Act requires assessments every year from grades three through eight, but only once in high school. President Bush has proposed requiring two additional tests in grades nine through eleven. If Congress supports this proposal, students would be assessed every year from grade three through eleven. The president has proposed \$250 million in funding to cover the additional costs of the new assessments.

Also in the president's proposal for high schools is a call for mandatory participation by twelfth graders in the NAEP. The NAEP is one of the few national assessments that track student achievement over time. Currently, the tests are administered every other year to a national sample of fourth- and eighth-grade students in the areas of reading and math, but participation at the twelfth-grade level is voluntary for states and the results for that age group are statistically unreliable. President Bush has also said that he would provide "bold and dramatically new incentives" to increase participation and encourage students to do well on the tests. According to the president, an expansion of the NAEP test will help to identify areas where high schools are not meeting the needs of students and strengthen curricula to ensure improvement.

President Bush has made other high school proposals, including a mathematics and science partnership program, an adjunct teacher corps, and funding to encourage rigorous courses in high school. More information on each of these programs, as well as the president's other high school proposals, are available in an Alliance issue brief, *The Presidential Candidates: Proposals to Increase High School Graduation Rates*, which is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/ThePresidentialCandidates/index.html>.

The administration's education policy paper, *Education: The Promise of America*, can be found at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/09/20040926.html#4>.



### **EDUCATION FUNDING STILL IN LIMBO: Congress to Consider Spending Bills During Lame-Duck Session**

During the week of November 15, the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives will reconvene for a lame-duck session to consider funding for the nine unfinished spending bills. Among these is the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education appropriations bill, which funds the U.S. Department of Education.

Before leaving Washington in October to campaign in their home districts and elsewhere, members of the Senate Appropriations Committee voted to provide \$58.85 billion for the U.S. Department of Education for fiscal 2005. That amount is \$1.2 billion higher than the bill passed by the House of Representatives back in September and \$1.5 billion more than President Bush requested when he submitted his budget in February. The higher levels in the Senate were made possible by a creative accounting mechanism that is opposed by the House Republican leadership.

It seems unlikely that the House will accept the Senate's version of the bill, a possibility that could make final agreement on a bill extremely difficult. The Congress has a number of options at this point. For instance, members could combine the nine remaining bills into a single omnibus bill and vote on all of the remaining appropriations at once. Most top congressional aides believe that negotiations on an omnibus spending bill will feature an aggressive White House that is "intent on forcing quick action, holding spending down, and pushing its own priorities," according to *CQ Weekly*. It is likely that an across-the-board cut could be used to hold down spending.

## Congress to Consider Spending Bills During Lame Duck Session

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The Congress could also choose to extend the continuing resolution, currently set to expire on November 20, which funds programs at their fiscal 2004 levels until January, when the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress will convene and can resolve the issues. However, this option could work against Republican moderates and Democrats seeking higher spending—especially considering that the number of Republican “budget hawks” will grow, particularly in the Senate. The White House has also made it clear that it wants the fiscal 2005 budget completed this fall.

Many observers believe the lame-duck session will offer a glimpse into how the triumphant Bush administration and the Republican Congress, with its increased majorities, intend to govern in the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress. “Watch what happens here,” **G. William Hoagland, the top budget aide to Senate Majority Leaders Bill Frist (R-TN)**, told *CQ Weekly*. “That will send a signal as to how tough we’re going to be . . . on domestic” discretionary spending.

More details on individual programs within the Labor, HHS, and Education appropriations bill are available in the September 27 issue of *Straight A’s*, which is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/StraightAs/Volume4No16.html>.



### **REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS: New Research Study to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Adolescent Literacy Programs**

Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Education announced that new awards through the Smaller Learning Communities program must focus on methods to improve reading and mathematics skills for students who enter high school significantly below grade level. This focus on reading and mathematics was a new requirement for the \$161 million grant program.

Continuing the department’s new interest in adolescent literacy, two nonprofit research companies, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and MDRC, are looking for high-quality supplemental literacy programs to participate in a research project that the department is funding. The study will examine the programs’ effectiveness in improving the reading skills of ninth graders who read two to four years below grade level. This project is part of the Evaluation of the Impact of the Supplemental Literacy Interventions in Small Learning Communities conducted by the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education. To be considered, the programs must address all aspects of reading, from advanced decoding skills to higher-level comprehension and writing, and must also consider issues of how to motivate adolescents to read. In consultation with an expert review panel, AIR will select two vendors of supplemental adolescent literacy programs that can be scaled up with a high degree of consistency. Even though two literacy programs will be selected, only one program will be assigned to a given school.

According to the request for proposals, the Office of Vocational and Adult Education at the U.S. Department of Education will run this competition within the Smaller Learning Communities program to “provide funds to districts with schools prepared to implement the new supplemental literacy programs within already existing freshman academies.” The compensation for the vendors’ provision of services and activities will come from federal grants to the participating districts through contractual arrangements with the grantee districts.

The study, a randomized field trial, will involve students enrolled in “freshman academies” in at least eight school districts and sixteen high schools. Each high school in the study will identify 100 to 125 striving readers based on eighth-grade reading assessments. From this group of ninth graders, approximately fifty students will be randomly selected to participate in the supplemental literacy program; the remaining students will be scheduled for a regular study hall or elective class. The study will take place during the 2005–06 and 2006–07 school years within a classroom setting of twelve to fifteen students per class. The students will receive a minimum of 225 minutes of literacy instruction per week, in either daily forty-five-minute classes or in eighty- to ninety-minute blocked classes every other day. The literacy class will be in addition to the students’ regular English or language arts classes.

The study will investigate the effectiveness of the two intervention programs compared with the “business as usual” English and language arts instruction that students normally receive as part of a ninth-grade curriculum. Outcome measures will include a diagnostic reading test (administered at the beginning and end of ninth grade to measure reading skill gains) and state reading test scores. Research will also focus on students’ grades in content-area courses, attendance, and inclination to stay in school.

A required “intent to bid letter” is due by **November 15**. Complete proposals are due by **December 6**. The contract award is anticipated by January 10, 2005. More information and the complete RFP are available at <http://www.air.org/ale/ale-set.htm>.

#### **Report Shows Rule Changes Could Help More Schools Satisfy No Child Left Behind Act**

During 2004, forty-seven states asked the U.S. Department of Education to approve changes to their No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability plans. A new report from the Center on Education Policy (CEP) concludes that these modifications have made it easier for schools and school districts to make Adequate Yearly Progress. In preparing its report, *Rule Changes Could Help More Schools Meet Test Score Targets for the No Child Left Behind Act*, CEP analyzed thirty-five official decision letters from the U.S. Department of Education to states that had requested amendments to their original accountability plans.

As explained in the CEP report, “Some of the changes requested by states are intended to take advantage of revisions made by the U.S. Department of Education in federal guidelines for testing students with disabilities, testing English language learners, and calculating the percentage of students taking state tests. Other changes proposed by states would provide more flexibility in areas not addressed by the revised federal guidelines or would allow states to adopt policies the department had already approved for other states.”

Three states—Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Washington—received permission to change their graduation rate targets. In Maryland and Pennsylvania, schools and subgroups of students can show progress if they meet state graduation rate targets of 81 percent or 80 percent, respectively, or show progress toward that goal—even if by only one-tenth of 1 percent. In Washington, state officials revised its graduation rate target down to 66 percent from 73 percent.

Other requests for changes reflected state-specific problems with the federal law. Overall, CEP says these changes have had a generally positive impact on schools trying to demonstrate AYP. The report concludes that such federally approved changes in state accountability plans may allow for short-term flexibility in implementation while maintaining NCLB’s long-term overall direction at the same time.

The complete report is available at <http://www.cep-dc.org/nclb/StateAccountabilityPlanAmendmentsReportOct2004.pdf>.



## **NCES REPORT FINDS STAGNATING GRADUATION RATES: NCES Acknowledges Data Limitations, Cites Efforts Underway to Improve Calculations**

A new report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that while high school completion rates improved in the 1970s and 1980s, these rates have since stagnated. While offering four types of graduation rates to “provide a broad picture of high school dropouts,” the report acknowledged its own shortcomings when it comes to studying high school dropout rates at the national level—in fact, it was unable to report a national dropout rate, but noted that efforts were already underway to improve data collection and reporting methods.

Most education researchers tend to dismiss the completion rates reported by NCES because of their data problems. The report, *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2001*, uses the Current Population Survey (CPS), taken from the U.S. Census Bureau, and the Common Core of Data (CCD), which is provided by state education agencies, to make its calculations. It notes that the CPS data does not provide information on military personnel or individuals “residing in group quarters, such as prison inmates,” nor is it a large enough sample size to reliably estimate state-level dropout rates. In addition, data from the CCD do not include information on students in private school and are not well suited for developing a national dropout rate because of missing information from some states.

While its graduation rates are questionable at best, the report is on point in its description of the importance of a high school diploma in today’s labor market. “Because high school completion has become a requirement for accessing additional education, or entering the labor force, the economic consequences of leaving high school without a credential are severe,” it reads. “On average, dropouts are more likely to be unemployed than high school completers and to earn less money when they secure work. High school dropouts are also more likely to receive public assistance than high school completers who do not go to college . . . Dropouts also make up disproportionately high percentages of the nation’s prison and death row inmates.”

Despite the unreliability on graduation rates, the NCES report agrees in many areas with more reliable reports. For example, it found that students living in low-income families were more likely to drop out than their peers from middle- and upper-income families. It also found a significant gap in the completion and dropout rates of white students and African-American and Hispanic students. It noted that while the gap began to narrow in the 1970s and 1980s, no further narrowing has been detected since 1990.

The report notes that “recent legislation enacted as part of the No Child Left Behind Act has increased interest in being able to study yearly change in high school graduation rates in general, and in on-time public high school graduation rates specifically.” NCES notes that the report does not include statistics on either concept because of “data limitations and on-going research into different measurement approaches,” but notes that it is working with “experts in the field of high school outcomes research” to develop graduation rate statistics that can more accurately represent an annual national graduation rate.

In the meantime, while NCES is working to improve its reliability on graduation rates, other researchers, such as Jay Greene and Greg Forster of the Manhattan Institute and Duncan Chaplin

and Chris Swanson of the Urban Institute, have stepped up to provide a more trustworthy estimate of graduation rates at the state and national level. Their work, along with other research on calculating graduation rates, will be featured at an Alliance event in December (see box below).

*Dropout Rates in the United States: 2001* is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/2005046.pdf>.

### **Join the Alliance for Excellent Education at a Symposium on Graduation Rates**

On Thursday, December 9, the Alliance for Excellent Education will host a symposium that will examine the current crisis surrounding inconsistent and inaccurate graduation rates. A panel of leading experts will discuss how the federal government can enforce accurate and effective ways to measure high school graduation rates.

Panelists include **Robert Balfanz** and **Nettie Letgers of Johns Hopkins University**, **Duncan Chaplin** and **Chris Swanson of the Urban Institute**, **Greg Forster of the Manhattan Institute**, and **Daniel Losen of the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University**.

The event will be held from 8:30 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. in the First Amendment Lounge at the National Press Club, located at 529 14th Street, NW, in Washington, D.C.

To RSVP, contact Kathleen Mohr at [kmohr@all4ed.org](mailto:kmohr@all4ed.org) by December 2. Space is limited.

### **U.S. Department of Education to Host Second National High School Leadership Summit**

On December 2–3, the U.S. Department of Education will hold its second annual National High School Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C., as part of its Preparing America’s Future High School Initiative. According to the department, this year’s summit will serve as a “next step” for “coordinating and strengthening the high school improvement efforts that are encouraged by the No Child Left Behind Act and enacted by leaders across the country.” The gathering will allow participants to hear about current high school reform efforts from experts and department officials.

The goals of the Preparing America’s Future High School Initiative are to

- equip state and local education leaders with current knowledge about high schools through special forums, print and electronic materials, and targeted technical assistance;
- develop the expertise and structures within the U.S. Department of Education to provide coordinated support and outreach toward helping state and local education systems improve high schools and youth outcomes; and
- facilitate a national dialogue to raise awareness about the need for significant reform in American high schools.

On Friday, November 12, the U.S. Department of Education will begin a period of “open registration.” At that time, individuals who are interested in attending will receive a registration link through its list-serve (subscribe by emailing [highschools@ed.gov](mailto:highschools@ed.gov)). Registration will be on a first-come, first-serve basis.

More information on the summit is available at <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/hs/index.html>.

**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 secondary school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.



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# StraightA's

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