



StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



A NEW VISION FOR NAEP: National Commission Recommends Mandatory NAEP Test for a Representative Sample of Twelfth-Grade Students

A commission comprised of representatives from the fields of education, policy, business, and the military, which was formed by the board that oversees the **National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)** test, has recommended that twelfth-grade tests in reading and mathematics become mandatory for selected students, with the goal of providing solid results at both the national and state levels.

NAEP is the only nationally representative and continuing assessment of what American students know and can do in various academic subjects. It is administered to randomly selected students in grades four and eight, and is voluntary among randomly selected twelfth-grade students. Since participation in the twelfth-grade tests is optional, only about half of the students who were selected to take them in 2002 actually did so. Such low participation rates make it impossible to depend on the results at the state level, and even the national scores' validity have been questioned by some.

“Twelfth-grade NAEP has the potential to supply crucial information about student achievement that America needs and that is unavailable from any other source, but NAEP is not now fulfilling that potential,” argues the commission’s report, *12th Grade Student Achievement in America: A New Vision for NAEP*. “America needs to know how well prepared its high school seniors are to become productive citizens and to compete in a global economy—how well they can read, write, and compute, and what they know about science, history, civics, and other important disciplines. Only the National Assessment of Educational Progress can provide this information—for the nation and for states—and it is necessary for our nation’s continued well-being that it be provided.”

The commission recognized that it will be challenging to get high school seniors in their last weeks of school to take the tests seriously. Dramatically new approaches for increasing school and student participation in NAEP at the high school level will be required. The report notes that the combined school and student participation rates at the twelfth-grade level fell from 65 percent in 1998 to 55 percent in 2002. To increase participation, the report warns that congressional approval and additional appropriations will be needed. However, it believes that in the end the “modest investment needed would be far out-weighed by the enormous benefits.”

A New Vision for NAEP

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One of those benefits, the commission believes, would be to provide information on the readiness of twelfth graders for college, employment, and the military—although this would require changes to the tests themselves.

The idea that NAEP tests, even in a revised form, could really gauge how well prepared students are for college or employment is not being embraced by all. Some researchers and policymakers believe that the road to redesigning the twelfth-grade NAEP test would be paved with difficulties. “We’ve really never set a national performance standard for college readiness,”

Michael W. Kirst, a professor of education at Stanford University, told *Education Week*. He stressed that the higher-education community would be reluctant to accept an extension of K–12 accountability to colleges.

The eighteen members of the commission were appointed by **Darvin Winick, chairman of the National Assessment Governing Board**. The commission met five times between March 2003 and early 2004, heard expert testimony from twenty-four witnesses, commissioned and reviewed six white papers and two research studies, and received input from the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Association of State Boards of Education. The National Assessment Governing Board is expected to vote on the commission’s recommendations this summer, following an extensive review process that will include public hearings.

The complete report is available at http://www.nagb.org/release/12_gr_commission_rpt.pdf.

The *Education Week* article is available at <http://www.edweek.com/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=26NAEP.h23>.



STUDY FINDS THAT RHODE ISLAND STUDENTS ARE NOT ALL COLLEGE READY

A new study by **Jack Warner, Rhode Island’s state commissioner of higher education**, found that Rhode Island’s high school curriculum does not adequately prepare all students for rigorous college-level work. The study examined how well the graduating class of 2001 performed at the state’s three public colleges—the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI), Rhode Island College (RIC), and the University of Rhode Island (URI). Of the 10,083 students who graduated, more than 25 percent enrolled at one of these three institutions.

According to an article in the *Providence Journal*, “College-track students are taking math and English classes that require analytical thinking and problem-solving skills, [but] students taking a more watered-down curriculum are not learning the skills they need to succeed in college.” The problem is not unique to Rhode Island. In *Public High School Graduation and College Readiness Rates in the United States*, **Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute** found that only 70 percent of all high school students graduate on time and only 32 percent leave high school “college ready.”

In a recent interview, Warner admitted being disturbed to learn that “many students wanted to attend college, but found themselves poorly equipped once they got there.” The study found that 30 percent of students who enrolled in CCRI in 2001 did not return the following year. In addition, more than 60 percent of the freshman class at CCRI had to take two or more remedial classes. However, students at the more selective RIC and URI appear to be more prepared: 86 percent of entering freshman at RIC and almost 94 percent of freshman at URI returned for a second year.

Education Commissioner Peter McWalters said that the state is aware of the problem and is taking action to get back on the right track. He stressed that public schools had to teach the higher-level thinking skills that are typically associated with an Algebra II class or a college-track English course. In the near future, the newspaper reported, Rhode Island seniors will have to complete a senior project or a portfolio of their work, or pass a series of end-of-course exams, in order to graduate.

Read the complete article at
http://www.projo.com/news/content/projo_20040309_reten9.ce14b.html.



PELL GRANTS PLUS: New Legislation Gains Traction on Capitol Hill

Currently, the federal government provides more than \$12 billion in Pell Grants to help low-income students defray the cost of college tuition and expenses. As demonstrated during the Senate debate on the budget resolution (see article on p. 4), an additional Pell Grant award for low-income students who complete a rigorous course load in high school has been gaining momentum on Capitol Hill. Over the last few weeks, legislation called the *Pell Grants Plus Act* has been introduced in both chambers of Congress.

On March 4 in the House, **Representative Max Burns (R-GA)**, along with ten cosponsors, introduced the act as H.R. 3894. “The *Pell Grants Plus Act* will provide additional financial assistance to hardworking students who have chosen to prepare for college by taking rigorous high school classes to help meet the academic challenges of higher education.” said **Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Boehner (R-OH)**, who is a cosponsor.

In the Senate, **Senator Jim Bunning (R-KY)** introduced the corresponding bill S. 2206 on March 11. “Pell Grants play a very important role in the education of our children . . . and my amendment cuts out a slightly bigger piece of the pie to help fund them,” he said. “This new Pell Grant program will reward those students who are willing to put in the extra effort in high school to help prepare themselves for a successful college career and who demonstrate financial need.”

The *Pell Grants Plus Act* reflects the president’s proposal to award an additional \$1,000 of Pell Grant funding to students who successfully complete a rigorous high school program of study as part of the State Scholars program (see box on p. 4). Students must be enrolled full time in their first year of study at an institution of higher education, and be eligible to receive a federal Pell Grant. In their second year of college, students would be able to receive an additional \$1,000 award if they remain eligible for a federal Pell Grant and obtain a grade point average of at least 3.0 during their first year, while making satisfactory academic progress.

State Scholars Program Overview

The State Scholars Initiative is designed to better prepare students academically for college and employment by encouraging them to take more rigorous courses. While currently in Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee, Oklahoma, Indiana, Maryland, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, and Washington, only Texas has fully implemented the initiative. The president's fiscal 2005 budget calls for \$12 million to expand the program to all fifty states. (More information on the Center for State Scholars is available at <http://www.centerforstatescholars.org/>).

Studies recently released by both the **Education Trust** and the **American Diploma Project** make the point that the best way to prepare a student for future success in college *or* the workplace is through a rigorous high school course schedule. According to these studies, students from every background and every income level benefit when placed in higher-level classes.

Federal funds awarded through the State Scholars program go to a partnership of local school districts, businesses, and other education entities. In order to encourage students to take more rigorous high school courses, business leaders make school presentations about college and careers, provide incentives to encourage students to enter college, and sometimes volunteer as mentors in local schools.

States currently participating in the program had to have their standards approved by the Center for State Scholars and the U.S. Department of Education. For a list of courses each state requires visit <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/StateScholarsRequirements.pdf>.



CONGRESS SHIFTS INTO BUDGET MODE: Senate Passes Congressional Budget Plan, House Expected to Act This Week

Earlier this month, **the U.S. Senate** passed its version of a fiscal 2005 budget plan after several days of debate and votes on scores of amendments. It includes \$81.1 billion in budget authority for “education, training, employment and social services, a \$3.1 billion (3.9 percent) increase over last year’s level. During floor debate, the Senate rejected amendments that would have increased the investment in education programs. It did, however, agree to increase the needs-based Pell Grant maximum award from \$4,050 to \$4,500 in its plan, as well as a provision inserted by **Senator Jim Bunning (R-KY)** for an additional \$33 million in Pell Grants for low-income students who complete a rigorous high school course load.

Among the rejected amendments was one offered by **Senators Patty Murray (D-WA)** and **Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA)** that would have fully funded the *No Child Left Behind Act* by adding \$8.6 billion. Senator Murray's amendment was defeated 46–52 on the Senate floor. An amendment by **Senator Christopher Dodd (D-CT)** that would have doubled funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers (afterschool program) from \$1 billion to \$2 billion was defeated 42–54.

The congressional budget resolution is a nonbinding blueprint that outlines Congress’s spending priorities for the year. While it is not signed by the president and does not have the force of law, it is an important determinant to the amount of spending the Appropriations Committee is allowed to allocate for specific departments and programs. Although the Senate rejected the Murray and Dodd amendments to add additional education funds, they accepted amendments that added funding for defense spending (\$7 billion), the National Institutes of Health (\$2 billion), emergency responders and port security (\$1.7 billion), forest restoration (\$343 million),

veterans' health research (\$101 million), and an expansion of health insurance for military reservists and National Guardsmen (\$5.6 billion).

The House version of the budget resolution was reported out of the House Budget Committee on March 17 and is expected to be debated on the House floor during the week of March 22. During committee markup, **Representative Darlene Hooley (D-OR)** offered an amendment that would have provided an additional \$6.2 billion for education that failed by a party-line vote of 16–22. In addition to raising the maximum Pell Grant award to \$4,500, the amendment would have added an additional \$3 billion for *NCLB* programs and an additional \$1.2 billion for the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. While the House budget plan takes a tough line on spending, it did add \$150 billion in additional tax cuts over the next five years.



FOCUS ON THE WONDER YEARS: New RAND Report Examines Challenges Facing Middle Schools

During the late 1980s, many television viewers tuned in to *The Wonder Years*, a drama series set in the 1960s that allowed viewers to see life through the eyes of Kevin Arnold, a junior high school boy. Through him we saw his first kiss, the struggle to get his father to buy a new color TV, and his first day of high school.

A new report from the RAND Corporation examines the multiple physical, social, and intellectual changes that students like Kevin Arnold undergo in middle school. It also offers recommendations on how middle schools can distance themselves from their “Bermuda Triangle of education” reputation, in which they are often blamed for increases in behavior problems, disengagement from school, and low achievement. The report, *Focus on the Wonder Years: Challenges Facing the American Middle School*, examines twenty years of literature on middle schools and analyzes existing national and international data.

“While many well-intended and reasoned reforms have been implemented in U.S. middle schools, we are not doing very well compared with the rest of the developed world,” said **Jaana Juvonen, a RAND psychologist and lead author of the report**. “The idea of a separate school for students in this age group seems to have been misguided in the first place, and major reform efforts are difficult to implement within the current system.”

Much like the large, comprehensive high schools that became popular during the middle of the last century—many of which looked more like factories than schools—a significant number of today’s middle schools were more a product of outside factors than specific educational or developmental considerations. According to the report, the concept of an intermediate school between elementary and high school often had more to do with labor market needs or the capacity of school buildings. The report also cites numerous studies that have found that young teens perform better in K–8 schools.

Meanwhile, school systems in Baltimore, Cincinnati, New York City, and Philadelphia have begun returning to more traditional K–8 schools (See “New York City to Eliminate Most Middle Schools” at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/StraightAs/Volume4No4.html#NYC>.) Not surprisingly, the report’s recommendations include a call for alternatives to the current sixth-to-

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eighth-grade middle school configuration which would reduce multiple transitions for students and allow schools to better align their goals across grades K–12.

Advocates for middle schools stress that changing a school's grade configuration won't magically make all the problems associated with middle schools disappear. "If you're not addressing what happens in the classroom, it really doesn't make a difference what grade configuration you have," **Michael J. Dietz, a middle school principal in Mequon, Wisconsin**, told *Education Week*. (Dietz also sits on the National Middle School Association's executive board.)

The report provides the first international comparisons on student well-being and school climate of middle-school-age youth. It compares American students (grades 6–8) to students of the same age in Belgium, Canada, the Czech Republic, England, Finland, Hungary, Israel, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, and the Slovak Republic. It notes that the performance of American middle school students in mathematics and science declines from elementary school to middle school when compared to other countries. At the same time, it recognizes that there has been overall improvement in standardized test scores in math, science, and reading since the 1970s, and suggests that efforts to improve achievement and reduce performance gaps among different groups of students are "at least somewhat successful."

In order to raise student achievement and continue to reduce achievement gaps, the report recommends interventions for the lowest-performing students, possibly including summer programs before the sixth grade, additional reading and math courses, and tutorials after sixth grade.

In addition to its conclusions about the academic performance of middle school students, the report found that U.S. students have negative perceptions of their learning conditions and "rank the highest [internationally] in terms of reported levels of emotional and physical problems." They also "view the climate of their schools and the peer culture more negatively than do students in other countries." Such disenchantment and social alienation are not only related to low achievement but are also predictors of whether students may eventually drop out of school.

The complete report is available at <http://www.rand.org/publications/MG/MG139/>.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION ISSUES MORE FLEXIBLE REGULATIONS ON TEACHER QUALITY

When first enacted into law, the *No Child Left Behind Act* was commended for its focus on accountability and standards. In recent months, however, as the number of schools "in need of improvement" has begun to rise, critics have assailed the law for a lack of funding and poor implementation. In response, the U.S. Department of Education has issued new regulations that make it easier for school districts to meet *NCLB* requirements for special education students, limited-English-proficiency students, and, most recently, highly qualified teachers.

Last week, **U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige** announced new flexibility in three categories (rural teachers, science teachers, and multi-subject teachers) for states that are

preparing to meet the 2005–06 deadline for ensuring that all teachers are highly qualified. For rural districts, teachers who are highly qualified in at least one subject will now have three years to become highly qualified in the additional subjects they teach.

Some states currently allow science teachers to be certified under a “general science” certification, while others require a subject-specific certification (such as physics, biology, or chemistry). Now states may determine—based on their current certification requirements—that science teachers are highly qualified either in “broad field” science or individual fields of science. Finally, for multi-subject teachers already in schools, the new flexibility would not require them to take a test in every subject to demonstrate that they meet highly qualified requirements.

Paige’s announcement stressed that *NCLB* allows states to create an alternative method (the High Objective Uniform State Standard of Evaluation, or HOUSSE) for teachers not new to the field to certify they know the subject they teach. However, until the new flexibility was announced, teachers would have had to go through HOUSSE for each subject they teach. Now states can streamline the HOUSSE process to demonstrate through one process that teachers are highly qualified in each of their subjects.

Read the U.S. Department of Education’s press release on

- increased flexibility for students with disabilities, at <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/freedom/local/spcedfactsheet.pdf>;
- increased flexibility for limited-English-proficient students, at <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/schools/factsheet-english.html>; and
- increased flexibility for the highly qualified teacher requirement, at <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/methods/teachers/hqtflexibility.html>.

New Leaders for New Schools: National Nonprofit Accepting Applications for 2004–05 Residencies

New Leaders for New Schools, a national nonprofit that fosters high levels of academic achievement for every child by recruiting, selecting, training, and supporting the next generation of outstanding urban public school principals, is now accepting applications for its 2004–05 residencies in Washington, D.C. Applications are accepted online at <http://www.nlms.org>, and the last deadline is April 1.

New Leaders for New Schools is looking for candidates who have an unyielding belief in the potential of all children to excel academically, possess the instructional knowledge to improve teaching and learning, demonstrate great interpersonal and communication skills, and have a strong leadership record that reflects the ability to define a vision, build teams, and get results.

For more information, and to RSVP for the last information session on March 24, contact Traci Higgins at thiggins@nlms.org or (202) 785-8894, ext. 3.

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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