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# StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **AMERICANS SPEAK ON HIGH SCHOOL REFORM: 51 Percent of Americans Say High Schools Need “Major Changes” or a “Complete Overhaul”**

One-third of the American public believes that America’s public education system is most responsible for the country’s success in the world—even more important than the democratic system of government or military strength—but two-thirds believe that America’s ability to compete will be threatened if American high schools do not improve in the next twenty-five years. In fact, according to *Ready for the World: Americans Speak on High School Reform*, Educational Testing Service’s (ETS) fifth annual nationwide survey, 43 percent of respondents think that if high schools do not improve over the next twenty-five years it will have a “very negative effect” on America’s ability to compete in the world, and 33 percent of respondents said that no improvement will have a “somewhat negative effect.”

“Americans view our public education system as central to our country’s success in the world,” says **ETS President and CEO Kurt Landgraf**. “But they also believe that after nearly two decades of reform efforts, the key to success continues to reside in rigorous learning for all students and improved teacher quality. Americans believe in standards and accountability. And, they want reform efforts expanded to address pressing quality issues with our nation’s high schools.”

When asked how well prepared they thought ninth-grade students were for high-school-level work, 25 percent of all adults and 27 percent of high school teachers said students were not at all well prepared. Meanwhile, 55 percent of all adults and 55 percent of high school teachers said that students were somewhat prepared, but had gaps in certain areas. Overall, 51 percent of Americans think that high schools needed “major changes” or a “complete overhaul.” Only 5 percent of those surveyed believe that high schools work well now.

According to the survey, most Americans (64 percent saying this was a “good explanation”) believe that the central problem with high schools is associated with broader societal issues and the fact that high schools and high school teachers have to address too many outside problems. Other good explanations for problems in high schools were a lack of resources and funding (51 percent) and inadequate preparation by elementary and middle schools (50 percent).

Although they believe that high schools are central to the nation’s future, when asked what should be the highest priority for reforming education, half of the adults surveyed indicated that elementary schools should be the number one focus, compared to 20 percent for high schools and 16 percent for middle schools.

## ***Americans Speak on High School Reform***

(Continued from p. 1)

“This report confirms the results that we’ve seen from our own polling,” said **Alliance for Excellent Education President and former West Virginia Governor Bob Wise**. “While the American public believes that high schools could be better than they are, they are hard-pressed to say high schools are in a ‘crisis.’ However, when we tell them that a third of our young people aren’t graduating from high school, and another third are graduating without the skills they need to succeed in postsecondary education or the workforce, they see the crisis and realize that something has to be done.”

The ETS survey was conducted April 5–17 among 2,250 adults nationwide, including a sample of 1,009 adults. Additional groups, including high school administrators, high school teachers, and parents of K–12 students, were oversampled to provide statistically significant results. Other resources, including survey results and methodology, and a PowerPoint presentation, are available at <http://www.ets.org/aboutets/americaspeaks/survey2005.html>.



### **HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES PASSES EDUCATION FUNDING BILL: Funding for Education Programs Essentially Frozen at Last Year’s Level**

On June 24, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the fiscal year 2006 Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education appropriations bill by a vote of 250 to 151. Virtually unchanged from the bill passed by the House Appropriations Committee, the bill would provide \$56.69 billion for the U.S. Department of Education for the fiscal year that begins in October 2005. This figure represents a \$115 million (0.2 percent) increase for the U.S. Department of Education over this year’s budget allocation—essentially the first freeze on education funding in a decade.

In a statement on the House floor, **House Labor, HHS, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Ralph Regula (R-OH)** explained that he would have liked to provide more money for what he dubbed the “People’s Bill,” but was held in check by tight budget constraints.

“We have made a commitment to reduce federal deficits,” he said. “We made some tough decisions. We eliminated four programs and did not initiate eight new programs proposed by the president . . . I want to say to my colleagues on the other side of the aisle and also on our side, it was a great subcommittee. Both Republican and Democrat members worked very well together, and we may have some disagreements on the amounts of money, but I think within the confines of what was available, we pretty much are in agreement with the assignment of priorities that were made.”

**Representative David Obey (D-WI), the ranking democrat on the House Appropriations Committee**, was deferential to Regula, but lashed out at the Republican leadership for short-changing education, health care, and other pressing needs in the bill. Obey tried in vain to increase funding for these programs, but was unsuccessful in appealing a Rules Committee decision that barred him from introducing an amendment to the spending bill that would have

provided an additional \$11.8 billion in funding for “high-priority education, health and worker protection programs.” For education programs alone, the amendment would have provided an additional \$7.8 billion. The amendment’s spending would have been paid for by reducing the tax cut (from \$140,000 to \$36,000) for individuals who make more than \$1 million a year.

“This bill is the clearest demonstration that I can think of of what happens when Congress puts \$140,000 tax cuts for people who make \$1 million a year or more ahead of our investment needs in our children, ahead of our investment needs in our health care system, and ahead of supporting programs that will help our workers compete in world markets,” he said. “This bill, make no mistake about it, is a prescription for a second-class economy.”

The Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, HHS, and Education is scheduled to mark up its version of the bill on July 12, but the final bill is not expected to go to the Senate floor before September.

A table showing the House-approved funding levels for all U.S. Department of Education programs is available at <http://www.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget06/06action.pdf>.

#### **Chairman Regula Notes Connection Between Reading and Dropout Rate**

*One of my goals as chairman of the subcommittee is to help ensure that all children can read by the end of the third grade. I might add at this point that I think one of the reasons for the excessive amount of dropouts in high school is because there is a lack of ability to read. It is a disgrace in the United States that 32 percent on average nationwide do not finish high school.*

—House Labor, HHS, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Ralph Regula, during debate on the FY 2006 Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education appropriations bill



#### **HOUSE COMMITTEE HOLDS THIRD HIGH SCHOOL REFORM HEARING: Private-Sector Witnesses Lament Lack of Adequately Prepared Graduates**

During the third in a series of hearings on high school reform, this one held June 28, the House Subcommittee on Education Reform turned its attention to the private sector and how it is working to help states and communities improve high school education.

“The private sector is uniquely qualified to help address the challenges of high school reform, because businesses recognize the importance of a strong secondary education in preparing students for future success,” said **Representative Mike Castle, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Education Reform**. “That’s why so many in the business community have joined with states and local communities to encourage innovation and meaningful reforms that will strengthen high schools and better prepare students for the future.”

**Bill Shore, director of U.S. Community Partnerships for GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) pharmaceuticals**, testified about the ways companies are contributing to K–12 education.

“Companies rank education as the number one social issue that they should help to

## House Committee Holds Third High School Reform Hearing

(Continued from p. 3)

address,” he said. Citing a study by the Council for Corporate and School Partnerships, Shore said companies contribute more to K–12 education than to all corporate public policy, advocacy, and lobbying combined.

Shore admitted that despite these investments, GSK and many other companies continue to experience difficulties finding individuals who are adequately prepared for the workforce. “We have situations where in companies and community colleges and university systems high school graduates have to take remedial programs,” he said. “GSK is a high-tech company that relies on being able to hire the cream of the crop. [In order] to be able to compete globally, we have to hire people—we would love to be able to home-grow our talent—from some other places. We have to have top-notch high schools to be able to do that.”

**Mike Watson, vice chairman of BellSouth Foundation**, agreed with Shore’s analysis of the prospective American worker. “The bottom line: Workers are not ready for the modern workplace,” he said. “The world of technology requires strong mathematics and science skills, plus the abilities to read, write well, to think and reason, and to explain complex concepts.” Watson talked about BellSouth’s support for high school reform in the fields of education leadership, teacher quality, and e-learning.

“As a technology company, we recognize that technology plays an integral role in education and can have a significant impact on student achievement. The BellSouth Foundation will be launching a new strategy in September that we believe will be instrumental in improving high schools in the Southeast. Called the BellSouth Foundation e-Learning Initiative, this strategy is designed to bring engaging, rigorous, online instruction to students throughout our region—particularly low-income and minority students—to help address the growing achievement gap.”

**Sarah Ravi Sterling, a program manager at Microsoft Corporation**, testified about the challenges the country faces as it relates to the role of women in science and technology education. Noting that the number of women interested in computer science as a major has fallen 80 percent between 1998 and 2004, and 93 percent since its peak in 1982, Sterling said that the trend away from computing starts at the middle and high school levels.

To reverse this trend, the National Center for Women & Information Technology (NCWIT), a coalition of more than forty corporations, academic institutions, government agencies, and nonprofits, was created to ensure that women are “fully represented in the influential world of IT and computing,” Sterling said. At the high school level, NCWIT is working to stimulate girls’ interest in IT and promote a positive, current image of technology workers and the kinds of innovative work women can do in computing. “Girls and women must play an important role in fostering new IT innovations if the U.S. is to remain competitive,” she said. “America needs the talent of all its citizens: our competitiveness, security, and ultimately the health of our democracy depends upon this.”

In her testimony, **Dr. Phyllis Hudecki, executive director of the Oklahoma Business and Education Coalition (OBEC)**, discussed ways that OBEC was involved with the State Scholars Initiative. State Scholars is a statewide program designed to better prepare high school students

academically for college and employment by encouraging them to take more rigorous courses. As part of its involvement with the program, OBEC recruits local business leaders to make presentations to eighth graders urging them to take on more challenging coursework in high school. According to Hudecki, the program, begun in 2003, is already beginning to show positive results.

In addition, Hudecki said, OBEC partnered with **Oklahoma Governor Brad Henry (D)** and other education leaders to pass a landmark education reform bill, Achieving Classroom Excellence (ACE), which was signed into law in June. Under the legislation, all high school students must take a college prep curriculum beginning in the 2006–07 school year unless their parents sign a statement opting out of such a curriculum. Other provisions include a requirement that high school students must pass four out of six end-of-instruction tests in order to receive a high school diploma beginning in 2008–09. The legislation also works to make the senior year more meaningful by encouraging students to take college courses, at the state’s expense.

As in the two previous hearings on high school reform, the role that should be played by the federal government in reforming high schools was unclear. However, witnesses once again asked the federal government to join the governors, foundations, nonprofits, and corporations that are actively working to resolve the crisis in America’s high schools.

Hudecki urged Congress, as part of its reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, to consider providing incentives for all fifty states to follow the lead of the eighteen states in the American Diploma Project that are working to close the expectations gap and restore value to the high school diploma. “Modest amounts of money can provide the impetus for the governors and business leaders to bring postsecondary and K–12 education leaders together to align high school standards, assessments, and curriculum with the demands of college and work,” she said.

Chairman Castle’s opening statement, witness testimony, and a video archive of the hearing are available at <http://edworkforce.house.gov/hearings/109th/edr/edrhearings.htm>.

### **Institute of Education Sciences Accepting Applications on High School Reform**

The Institute of Education Sciences, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education, is now accepting applications for its research program on high school reform. Through the High School Reform initiative, IES will support research that identifies ways to improve high school education as measured by objective indicators such as higher test scores, higher graduation rates, and more successful transitions from high school into the world of work and postsecondary education.

“The program’s purpose is to support research on approaches, programs, and practices that enhance the potential of at-risk students to complete high school with the skills necessary for success in the workplace, college, or the military,” the application reads. “This new initiative will complement the Institute’s existing programs of research in improving teacher quality and academic achievement in reading/writing and mathematics and science, and in the finance and management of schools.”

Ultimately, the program hopes to provide an array of high school reform practices that have been proven effective at improving student outcomes. Interested parties must submit a letter of intent by September 12, 2005. Final applications are due no later than November 10, 2005.

More information, including the complete application, is available at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/hsresearch/index.html>.



## **GETTING HONEST ABOUT GRAD RATES: Unreliable Graduation Rates Undercut High School Reform Efforts, According to New Report**

High school reform efforts will be badly undermined by a lack of information on how many students are successfully completing high school and earning a diploma, according to a new report from the Education Trust. *Getting Honest About Grad Rates: How States Play the Numbers and Students Lose* is the latest in a spate of reports that call attention to the fact that far too many states are not providing accurate data on graduation rates, and that the U.S. Department of Education has failed to exert the necessary leadership and hold states accountable for their unreliable data.

“If we are going to prepare students for the challenges of college, work, and life, we need to transform our high schools,” said **Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust**. “But if we are to persuade policymakers, educators, and the public to take on the vital and necessary work of high school reform, states must start telling the truth—telling the truth about how many students aren’t graduating from high school. And it would sure help if the U.S. Department of Education stopped sitting on the sidelines and worked to put an end to these shameful practices.”

This year, the report notes, states were required to report statewide graduation rates to the U.S. Department of Education, but were given quite a bit of leeway in this regard. In fact, there is no specific formula that states must use to calculate graduation rates, nor a specific requirement for how much a state must raise its graduate rate to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).<sup>1</sup>

As a result, the data most states submitted, if any, were either incomplete or “dubiously high” when compared to the results of independent analyses of state graduation rates. In fact, fifteen states reported graduation rates that differed by over 15 percent from an independent analysis by the **Urban Institute’s Chris Swanson**. In North Carolina, for example, the state-reported graduation rate of 97 percent was a full 33 percentage points higher than the rate that Swanson calculated (64 percent).

At the same time, the graduation-rate goals many states set were either “laughable” or “almost meaningless.” For example, the report notes that thirty-four states have set graduation-rate goals that are *lower* than their reported graduation rates for the 2002–03 school year, while thirty-one states have said that *any* improvement in the graduation rate is sufficient to meet AYP.

Among its recommendations, the report calls on Congress to ensure that states set meaningful goals for raising graduation rates when it reauthorizes the No Child Left Behind Act. It also asks that states be required to count graduation-rate improvement among subgroups of students (minority students, low-income students, students with disabilities, etc.) as one of their goals for making AYP. Currently, states must report graduation rates for subgroups of students, but they only need to show improvement for the student body as a whole in order to make AYP. In most

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<sup>1</sup> The report notes that under the No Child Left Behind Act’s accountability provisions, known as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), schools “must demonstrate progress toward educating all students to state standards in reading and math. Schools must also meet goals set by their state for high school graduation rates.” In simpler terms, this provision requires states to set annual goals but allows them to choose their own methods of calculation and the amount of yearly improvement they must make.

states, a school can make AYP even if the graduation rate for low-income, minority, or other subgroups of students is *declining*, as long as the graduation rate for the school as a whole improves.

In reviewing the report's findings, **Washington Post staff writer Jay Mathews** writes "No Child Left Behind tries to encourage high schools to improve their graduation rates, but unlike its test score improvement provisions, it does not threaten much action if they don't. It turns out this is like telling all the thieves in the neighborhood that you have turned off your burglar alarm."

*Getting Honest About Grad Rates: How States Play the Numbers and Students Lose* is available at <http://www2.edtrust.org/EdTrust/Press+Room/HSGradRate2005.htm>.

Jay Mathews's column, "North Carolina's Near Perfect Graduation Rate, and Other Fables," is at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2003/10/28/AR2005032304292.html>.

### **NGA Calls for Better Alignment of Federal Education Laws**

On June 22, the National Governors Association brought together leading education experts from preschool through college (P-16) to discuss ways to align federal education laws. Forum participants argued that better alignment would create a more seamless education system, reduce duplication, and improve systemwide accountability, among other benefits.

"Our education system must be coordinated to serve all students for a lifetime of learning," said **Virginia Governor Mark Warner (D)**. "What children in Head Start learn should prepare them for kindergarten just as much as what high school students learn should prepare them for college and work. Alignment of federal P-16 laws will ultimately improve education for all students."

NGA released a preliminary analysis on the relationship between major federal education laws. The analysis found that federal education laws too often

- include inconsistent requirements across laws and programs;
- establish duplicative requirements that may result in unnecessary burdens on states;
- create no clear, coherent system to effectively and efficiently report information to the public, federal agencies, or Congress; and
- provide funding limitations that hamper the integration and more strategic use of education dollars that were allocated for a common purpose.

More information on the event, including the preliminary analysis, is available at [http://www.nga.org/nga/newsRoom/1,1169,C\\_PRESS\\_RELEASE^D\\_8555,00.html](http://www.nga.org/nga/newsRoom/1,1169,C_PRESS_RELEASE^D_8555,00.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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In this issue:

- Americans Speak on High School Reform: 51 Percent of Americans Say High Schools Need "Major Changes" or a "Complete Overhaul"
- House of Representatives Passes Education Funding Bill: Funding for Education Programs Essentially Frozen at Last Year's Level
- House Committee Holds Third High School Reform Hearing: Private-Sector Witnesses Lament Lack of Adequately Prepared Graduates
- Getting Honest About Grad Rates: Unreliable Graduation Rates Undercut High School Reform Efforts, According to New Report



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