



StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



WHAT'S IN A NUMBER?: The Nation's Governors and the U.S. Department of Education Weigh In on the Graduation Rate Debate

Under the provisions of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, states are required to report statewide graduation rates to the U.S. Department of Education, but the department has allowed quite a bit of leeway in this regard. As a result, states are using at least five different calculation methods, most of which are highly questionable, according to independent researchers. For example, eleven states reported graduation rates that differed by more than 15 percent from an independent analysis by **Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research**.

Without valid calculations of high school graduation rates, it is impossible to assess the progress being made by the nation's schools and students. A careful analysis of high school graduation patterns provides essential insight into the performance of the public education system and should be a critical component in the development of future education policy. To address the uncertainty around state-reported graduation rates, two entities—the U.S. Department of Education and the National Governors Association (NGA)—took separate but parallel actions regarding graduation rates last month.

On July 17, at the NGA's national meeting in Iowa, forty-five governors and twelve national organizations, including the Alliance for Excellent Education, signed "A Compact on State High School Graduation Data," agreeing to take a variety of steps to improve the reliability of the graduation rates they report. (Since then, two additional governors have signed the compact, leaving only Florida, Texas, and Wyoming yet to join.) By signing, governors agreed to begin improving state data collection and implementing a standard four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate that reports the percentage of students who graduated within four years of their initial enrollment in ninth grade, with adjustments for transfers in and out of the system.

"As chairman of NGA, I have made it my priority to raise national awareness about the urgent need to improve America's high schools and make them more challenging and relevant to student needs," said **NGA Chairman Virginia Governor Mark Warner**. "However, without better data, our efforts will fall short. Because of the inconsistent quality of state data on graduation and dropout rates, many states cannot account for the status of their students as they progress through high school and beyond. The historic compact we signed today will help address this problem."

The compact is supported by a new report from NGA's Task Force on State High School Graduation Data that was developed with input from representatives of eight governors' offices

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and several national organizations. *Graduation Counts* outlines five recommendations that states should use to develop a high-quality, comparable high school graduation measure, as well as complementary indicators of student progress and outcomes and data systems capable of collecting, analyzing, and reporting the data.

In a move that should complement states' efforts to more accurately measure graduation rates and develop better, more comprehensive data collections systems, the U.S. Department of Education announced on July 13 that it will publish states' Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR) alongside the graduation rates that states currently report under NCLB. While the governors' efforts to implement long-term systemic change in states' practice of collecting and reporting graduation rates will take time and resources, calculations by the U.S. Department of Education will provide an interim mechanism for comparing data across states.

The following chart briefly outlines comparisons between NCLB's graduation rate reporting requirements and NGA and the U.S. Department of Education's graduation rate calculations.

No Child Left Behind	U.S. Department of Education	National Governors Association
<p>The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires states to use graduation rates when calculating Adequate Yearly Progress for public high schools.</p> <p>NCLB defines graduation rates for public secondary students as "the percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years."</p> <p>Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Education released regulations to allow states to "use another definition, developed by the [department] that more accurately measures the rate of students who graduate from high school with a regular diploma."</p> <p>As a result, 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.</p>	<p>The U.S. Department of Education will report the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR) alongside the rates reported by each state as part of the state report card.</p> <p>In calculating the AFGR, the U.S. Department of Education will use existing data submitted through the Common Core of Data, which is part of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).</p> <p>The AFGR is the number of high school graduates receiving a regular diploma in a given year divided by the average of the number of students enrolled in eighth grade five years earlier, ninth grade four years earlier, and tenth grade three years earlier.</p>	<p>The governors agreed to calculate graduation rates by dividing the number of on-time graduates in a given year by the number of first-time entering ninth graders four years earlier.</p> <p>Under the compact, graduates are those students who receive a high school diploma. The denominator can be adjusted for transfers in and out of the system.</p> <p>The governors also agreed to develop data systems to track individual students with a longitudinal student unit record data system. When in place, this system will allow states to have even more accurate records of what is happening to students.</p> <p>Additional issues to be addressed under the compact include five- or six-year cohort graduation rates, completion rates for those earning alternative credentials, in-grade retention rates, a college-readiness rate, and a high school dropout rate.</p>

Graduation Counts: A Report of the NGA Task Force on State High School Graduation Data is available at <http://www.nga.org/Files/pdf/0507GRAD.PDF>.



LOST IN TRANSLATION: International Improvements in Access to Primary Education Fall Short at the Secondary Level

When Kenyan president Mwai Kibaki assumed power in 2003, he made the institution of free primary education across the country one of his first acts. That year, the number of primary students rose by 1.5 million. However, according to an article in *Education Week*, that good news did not translate into success at the secondary level. Less than half of the children who complete primary school in Kenya enroll in secondary school.

“The push for secondary schools in Kenya and elsewhere among the poorer countries of the world follows a widespread move toward free basic education for all,” the article reads. “Policymakers in poor and middle-income countries generally believe the chance to compete vigorously in a global economy is linked to secondary education, in which students get advanced information skills.”

In order to increase participation at the secondary level, many of these countries must clear several roadblocks that block their progress. The first hurdle is often one of access. In Kenya, many of the nation’s roughly four thousand secondary schools are already bursting at the seams and cannot accommodate any more students. In addition, in a country where the average annual family income is about US\$400, the \$275 public boarding high school fee is too extravagant for most families.

According to the *Education Week* article, many families are taking the access problem into their own hands—literally—and are building secondary schools alongside the primary schools their forebears built. These efforts “not only open more seats,” they also “put the cost of secondary school within more parents’ reach,” with the new homegrown schools costing only a third as much as public boarding high schools.

At the secondary level, education costs several times more on average than primary education, because secondary teachers earn more and materials and equipment are more expensive. In addition to paying higher tuition, parents must also decide whether they can both forgo an older child’s labor for that time and pay other fees often associated with secondary education.

The article adds that, as is often the case in poorer countries, corruption is always an issue. In addition, a certain degree of “inefficiency”—with high rates of dropping out and repeating grades—is associated with secondary schooling. “But increasing efficiency often means going against deeply held views, as well as special interests,” the article notes. **Jacob Bregman, an education specialist for the World Bank**, speaking in a personal capacity, told *Education Week* that teachers in West Africa “must often be convinced that student failure harms rather than helps the system. ‘They think a healthy dose of repetition and dropping out is improving the quality of those that last,’ he explained.” Without improvements in these two areas, international donors are reluctant to make up the gap between what countries have and what countries need.

“Next Up for Developing Nations: Secondary Schooling” is available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/07/27/43secondary.h24.html>.

Japanese College Students Lack Basic Skills

More than 60 percent of teachers at private universities and junior colleges in Japan think that their students' basic academic abilities are insufficient, according to a survey by the Japan Universities Association for Computer Education. In a similar study six years ago, only 40 percent of teachers thought their students were underprepared, according to results published in the Japanese newspaper the *Daily Yomiuri*.

"The association, an incorporated body under the control of the Education, Science and Technology Ministry, expressed its concerns because the number of applicants for places at universities and junior colleges will equal the number of places available in two years' time—meaning anybody wanting to enter higher education institutions can enroll if they have no specific preference," the article reads.

Similar to attitudes in the United States, the most concerns were around the math and science disciplines. Among Japanese teachers of science and technology, the "sense of crisis" over the slippage in college students' preparedness was much higher than their peers in other disciplines. Among natural science lecturers, 74.8 percent at four-year universities and 72.5 percent at junior colleges cited the problem.

Many university lecturers said some of their students "could not solve linear simultaneous equations that are taught in middle school, and some medical students did not take biology as a subject in high school." "It's not unusual for university students to be unable to calculate fractional and decimal numbers," said **Professor Mitsuo Yoshizawa of the Tokyo University of Science**.

In the 2003 Program for International Student Assessment, which compares international results in science and math every three years, Japanese fifteen-year-olds placed fourth. This raises a disturbing question for educators in the United States: If Japanese college students are less well prepared than their peers were six years earlier, what does that mean for American fifteen-year-olds, who scored twenty-fourth out of the twenty-nine countries?

"60 Percent of University Teachers Say Students Lack Basic Abilities" is available at <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/20050722TDY02007.htm>.



TEXAS TEACHER QUALITY SURVEY: Students in Low-Income Schools Likely to be Taught by Less Experienced, Poorly Qualified Teachers

Texas schools with large percentages of poor or minority students are most likely to be taught by less experienced teachers who are often uncertified in the subject area they teach, according to a recent study by **University of Texas researcher Edward Fuller**. Meanwhile, the most affluent schools have some of the most qualified teachers in the state. "The real bottom-line problem is that we're dooming kids who live in certain ZIP codes because we don't provide them the quality teachers they deserve," Fuller told the *San Antonio Express-News*, for which he conducted the statewide analysis.

Fuller's research took three factors into account: a school's teacher employment turnover rate; the percentage of teachers with less than three years of experience; and the number of teachers teaching outside their area of certification. He then assigned every school a Teacher Quality Index (TQI) based on how they compared with other schools in the state. Schools in the top 10 percent are given a rating of 1, while schools in the bottom 10 percent receive a 10 rating.

Fuller chose the indicators because each represented a different facet of teacher quality: schools with high turnover rates are unlikely to have good working conditions; beginning or novice teachers often do not have the experience to be effective; and teachers who are not certified in

the subject they teach often lack necessary in-depth knowledge. “They’re kind of crude indicators of teacher quality, but they are correlated with student achievement,” Fuller said.

Experts advised that schools could best use the ratings as a diagnostic tool. **Susanna Loeb, a Stanford University economist**, told the *Houston Chronicle* that school administrators should use the ratings as a starting point for a larger discussion about whether their best teachers are working with the students who need the most help.

Some districts are promoting incentives to draw more highly qualified teachers into their schools. In Houston, the district is offering teachers up to \$3,000 a year extra to teach in their schools, but only if teachers improve student performance. The Fort Bend Independent School District is offering an extra \$3,000–4,500 a year to recruit twenty expert teachers into Willowridge High School, which received an average TQI of 8.33 and has a minority enrollment of over 70 percent. So far, eight teachers have agreed to teach at Willowridge under the plan.

However, money is not always the answer to recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers. In *Tapping the Potential*, the Alliance for Excellent Education pointed to evidence that found that new teachers’ decisions to transfer out of low-income schools often rested not on financial concerns, but on the extent to which those schools supported them with well-matched mentors, guidance in using curriculum, and positive hiring processes. In fact, the report cites comprehensive induction, especially in a teacher’s first two years on the job, as the single most effective strategy to stem the rapidly increasing teacher attrition rate.

Tapping the Potential: Retaining and Developing High-Quality New Teachers is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/TappingThePotential/index.html>.

The *San Antonio Express-News* article, which includes Fuller’s TQI rating for every school in Texas, is available at http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/education/stories/MYSA052205.1A.teacher_quality.299e89fd3.html.



“BILL GATES’ GUINEA PIGS”: An In-Depth Look at High School Transformation Through the Eyes of a Gates Grantee

In fall 1999, Mountlake Terrace High School in Washington State accepted an \$833,000 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to divide up its large comprehensive high school of about 1,800 students into separate parts. In the years since, the Gates Foundation has invested nearly \$1 billion in more than 1,600 schools in its effort to help redesign the American high school. A recent article in the *Seattle Weekly News* provides an in-depth look at the changes that Mountlake Terrace underwent during the transformation process.

After two years of planning, Mountlake Terrace was ready to divide into five new schools. All of them would continue to offer a basis in English, math, science, and history, but they would go about it in different ways. During the first year in the smaller schools, students commented how wonderful it was to know all of the other students, and teachers appreciated the chance to get to know their students on a more personal level. According to the article, the smaller schools also allowed closer tracking of individual students, but many programs were duplicated from school

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to school and resources such as rooms or calculators got “overbooked.” Almost immediately, students typecast the individual small schools as “stoner,” “jock,” “geek,” “preppy,” or even “gangsta,” or “druggie” schools.

In the article, **Tom Vander Ark**, executive director of education initiatives for the **Gates Foundation**, conceded that conversion from a large, comprehensive high school to smaller learning communities was very slow and very different from what had been expected. “Many of the schools are spending two years figuring out what to do, and another two years making structural changes,” he said. “They never get to the heart of the matter, which is improving teaching and learning . . . It’s probably more important to improve the curriculum, the school culture, the relationships in the school.”

While it is still too early to make any final conclusions, the article notes that educators and the Gates Foundation are learning some critical lessons about the transformation process. In the end, however, the foundation’s concern is that the momentum for high school reform and redesign will not last after the initial funding dries up. “Bill and Melinda have already committed \$1 billion,” Vander Ark said. “They are likely to commit another billion. But that’s just 5 to 10 percent of what it’ll take just to address the high-school challenge. When you add in all the other schools, it’s going to take a lot more than the Gates Foundation to solve this problem.”

The complete article is available at

http://www.seattleweekly.com/features/0529/050720_news_gateseducation.php.



TEN GRANTS AWARDED UNDER SMALLER LEARNING COMMUNITIES SPECIAL COMPETITION: Program Will Serve as the National Research Evaluation of Supplemental Reading Programs for Striving Ninth-Grade Readers

Earlier this month, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) announced ten awards under a special competition through the Smaller Learning Communities program that will serve as the national research evaluation of supplemental reading programs in freshman academies. Through the competition, which the department has dubbed “Enhanced Reading Opportunities” (ERO), OVAE awarded grants to ten school districts that applied on behalf of two to four large public high schools that are implementing freshman academies.

ERO will test the effectiveness of two supplemental literacy interventions targeted to “striving ninth-grade readers,” or students with reading comprehension skills that are two to four years below grade level and who are enrolled in freshman academies. The interventions will include direct classroom instruction, reading materials that are targeted to adolescents, ongoing student assessments, and professional development for teachers.

A panel of literacy experts from across the country selected the two supplemental literacy programs that will be evaluated: Reading Apprenticeship for Academic Literacy, developed and

supported by WestEd; and the Strategic Instruction Model, developed and supported by the Center for Research on Learning at the University of Kansas.

Grant recipients and award amounts are as follows:

School District	Award Amount
Atlanta Public Schools, Ga.	\$4,980,000
Anne Arundel County Public Schools, Md.	\$4,962,833
Omaha Public Schools, Neb.	\$1,927,351
Greece Central/Rochester City School District, N.Y.	\$4,998,033
Syracuse City School District, N.Y.	\$5,000,000
Richland County School District, S.C.	\$2,500,000
Houston Independent School District, Tex.	\$4,976,992
San Antonio Independent School District, Tex.	\$4,842,752
Ogden City School District, Utah	\$2,497,188
Norfolk Public Schools, Va.	\$4,903,455
For more information and project abstracts for each grantee, visit http://www.all4ed.org/learning_comm/SLC-ERO_GrantList.pdf .	

Striving Readers Update

The U.S. Department of Education expects to release the Federal Register Notice inviting applicants for new awards for the Striving Readers fiscal year 2005 grant in early August 2005.

When the application becomes available, the Alliance for Excellent Education will send an Alliance Alert with further information via email. Individuals who receive *Straight A's* in print form who want to make sure they get the alert should email their name and email address to all4ed@all4ed.org with "Alliance Alert" in the subject line.

In the meantime, individuals with any questions on the Striving Readers program should call the department's Striving Readers hotline at 202-205-6272 or email the department at StrivingReaders@ed.gov.



With schools around the country out for summer, the Alliance newsletter—although not the Alliance staff—will be taking a summer vacation during the month of August.

The next issue of *Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress* will be dated September 6.

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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