



ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



YEAR IN REWIND: High School Reform Garner National Headlines, but Most Work Done at State and Local Levels

The prospects for high school reform at the federal level kicked off the year 2005 on a high note when President Bush outlined a broad range of high school reforms designed to help every high school student graduate with the skills necessary to succeed in college and be competitive in the workforce. However, by the end of the year, there were few changes at the federal level. In fact, most of the efforts to improve the nation's high schools were made at the state and local levels.

Although the president's high school reform proposal included a \$175 million increase for the Striving Readers program, customized student intervention plans, and increased funding for programs that encourage students to take more rigorous courses, it was largely characterized by the media as an attempt to extend the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act to high schools. That characterization gave pause to many members of Congress, who were hearing complaints from their districts about NCLB's unfunded mandates and numerous requirements.

Many observers believe that President Bush's plan for high schools never had a realistic shot on Capitol Hill, because many Democrats felt burned over less-than-promised funding for NCLB and many Republicans were wary of further extending federal education requirements. Initial congressional skepticism for the plan quickly turned to outright dismissal from Democrats and Republicans alike when they learned in February that Bush would pay for it by consolidating funding streams and eliminating funding for popular programs such as vocational and technical education, GEAR UP, and TRIO.

Near the end of February, the National Governors Association and Achieve shifted the conversation back to the state level when they held their national education summit on high schools. The summit sought to redefine the role of the high school in America while better connecting its curriculum to the expectations that high school graduates will face in college and the workforce. During the summit, governors and other participants focused on an array of reform-related issues that were released as part of a 5-point action agenda states can follow to raise graduation rates and close preparation gaps. At the conclusion of the summit, the NGA and six partner foundations announced a \$42 million initiative to support the summit's call to overhaul the nation's high school system.

In the keynote address, **Bill Gates, chairman of Microsoft and cofounder of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**, garnered headlines when he suggested that today's high schools are "obsolete" and unequipped to adequately prepare the workforce of the 21st century. "Training the workforce of tomorrow with the high schools of today is like trying to teach kids about today's computers on a 50-year-old mainframe," he said. "It's the wrong tool for the times."

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In a report to governors attending the summit, the Alliance for Excellent Education wrote that improving state high school graduation rates could produce significant wage increases, resulting in healthier state economies. The Alliance calculated that some states could see earnings increases of \$100 million or more if they could halve the percentage of students who do not finish high school in 4 years.

In May, the House Education and the Workforce Committee held the first of three hearings on high school reform. At the hearing, **Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney (R)** and **Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack (D)** agreed that strengthening high school education is a national priority, but said they were not ready to see a federal version of NCLB for high schools. **House Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Boehner (R-OH)** and **Ranking Member George Miller (D-CA)** also clearly understood the crisis facing high schools, but they agreed that the federal government should take some time to observe reform efforts already underway in the states before creating more federal requirements at the high school level.

One month later, the committee held a second hearing, focusing this time on the role of nonprofit organizations in state and local high school reform efforts. During the third hearing, 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. After each of these hearings, the federal government's role in reforming high schools was still unclear. However, in the third hearing, witnesses once again asked the federal government to join the governors, foundations, nonprofit organizations, and corporations that are actively working to resolve the crisis in America's high schools.

In July, the U.S. Department of Education announced plans to calculate an Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate for all states alongside the state-reported rates that are required under NCLB. When the department reported this number in November, it was apparent that a majority of the states drastically overestimate the number of students who graduate from high school—11 states differed from the AFGR by 10 percent or more, and 16 states reported differences between 5 and 10 percent. Only 11 states were within 3 percent of the department-calculated graduation rate.

Around the same time as the department's original announcement, the National Governors Association resolved to exercise tighter control over runaway graduation rates. Since that time, all 50 governors and 12 national organizations, including the Alliance for Excellent Education, signed "A Compact on State High School Graduation Data," and agreed to take steps to improve the reliability of the graduation rates they report.

An August poll by the Alliance for Excellent Education found that Americans believe improving the nation's high schools should be the country's number one education priority. According to the poll, 83 percent of Americans feel there is an "extremely urgent" or "very urgent" need to improve the nation's high schools, compared with 79 percent for middle schools and 76 percent for elementary schools. According to the poll, 87 percent of the American public is "extremely concerned" or "very concerned" to learn that the national graduation rate is only about 70 percent and that graduation rates drop to 50 percent or lower in many urban areas. How do we solve the dropout crisis in America's high schools? Poll respondents overwhelmingly believed

that improving reading comprehension and writing is the “most important factor” in increasing graduation rates.

At the end of the year, however, high school reform did not have much to show at the federal level. Most of the president’s proposals to reform high schools were not funded, and the House of Representatives chose to take a hands-off approach to mandating change at the high school level. Until it begins to hear from the American public and a groundswell of public opinion joins the push from governors, foundations, and nonprofits to reform America’s high schools, Congress appears inclined not to take action. Meanwhile, every school day another 7,000 students drop out.

As **Tom Vander Ark, executive director of education for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**, said at the second congressional hearing, “There is a unique window of opportunity to redesign the American high school for the twenty-first century, and it is imperative—for both individual students and our nation—that we seize this opportunity and spur change at the local, state, and federal levels. We—national nonprofit organizations, concerned community members, policymakers at all levels, parents, educators, and others—cannot afford to let this window of opportunity close without drawing upon our common visions, best experiences, and lessons learned to ensure that all students have access to high-quality high schools.”



NAEP SCORES FOR LARGE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICTS REVEAL LARGER ACHIEVEMENT GAPS: Percentage of Students Reading “Below Basic” Over 50 Percent in Some Cities

Eighth-grade students in the nation’s urban areas are more likely to read at the “below basic” level than their peers in other parts of the country, according to the latest results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2005 Mathematics and Reading Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA). The report, called the “Nation’s Report Card,” said that average scores went up over the last 2 years in Boston, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, and San Diego, but went down in Charlotte, Washington, D.C., and New York City. Average scores were unchanged in Atlanta and Cleveland. The report also found larger achievement gaps in these cities between white students and their black and Hispanic classmates than those that exist nationally.

“Although there is an increasing awareness of the need to improve the literacy levels of our country’s middle and high school students, and more understanding of the kinds of interventions that can make a difference,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education**, “the results reported today for the eleven cities clearly demonstrate that we still are not doing what is needed to help students throughout the nation to build the reading skills they need to deal with increasingly complex high school courses.”

The report found that the average score for each city district was lower than the average score for the nation, except in Austin and Charlotte, where the average scores were about the same. Compared with students in “large central cities”—defined as a large central city with a population at or above 250,000—students in Austin, Boston, Charlotte, and San Diego posted higher average scores, while students in Atlanta, Cleveland, the District of Columbia, Houston, and Los Angeles scored lower, on average. As the chart below demonstrates, districts with lower

NAEP Scores for Large City School Districts Reveal Larger Achievement Gaps

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than average scores tended to have more students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, while the opposite was true for districts with higher than average scores.

District	Average Score	Difference from Nation	Difference from Large Central City	Percent of Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
Nation	260	N/A	+10	39%
Large central city	250	-10	N/A	63%
Charlotte	259	-1	+9	45%
Austin	257	-3	+7	49%
San Diego	253	-7	+3	54%
Boston	253	-7	+3	76%
New York City	251	-9	+1	84%
Chicago	249	-11	-1	81%
Houston	248	-12	-2	71%
Cleveland	240	-20	-10	100%
Atlanta	240	-20	-10	74%
Los Angeles	239	-21	-11	78%
District of Columbia	238	-22	-12	70%

The report also found that city school districts had higher percentages of students reading below basic, which indicates that students are often unable to comprehend the vocabulary or content of the material in their textbooks. This inability to access upper-level material affects more than their achievement in English and language arts classes; it also prevents students from mastering content in science, history, and even algebra. These students are especially significant, because research has shown that they are more likely to drop out of school than students reading at the highest achievement level.

Among the 11 city districts assessed, only Charlotte, with 31 percent of its students reading below basic, was close to the national average of 29 percent. Austin (35 percent), San Diego (37 percent), Boston (39 percent), New York City (39 percent), Chicago (40 percent), and Houston (41 percent) were at or below the average percentage of students reading below basic for large central cities (40 percent). In Cleveland (51 percent), Atlanta (54 percent), Los Angeles (53 percent), and Washington, D.C. (55 percent), a higher percentage of eighth graders read below basic than at the basic, proficient, and advanced levels *combined*.

“For the most part, we stop teaching our children how to read when they leave third grade, and expect that they’ll continue to expand vocabulary and comprehension skills on their own,” Wise said. “While this may work for some students, others, especially those from low-income families, never make the necessary transition from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*. The investments made in early grades to teach our kids to read are critical, but we must continue to intervene throughout their school years to assure that they are maintaining and expanding the literacy skills that are so necessary for success in life.”

The report also revealed that achievement gaps between white students and their black and Hispanic classmates in the 11 cities assessed are wider than at the national level. In most cases, white students in the 11 city districts score higher than their white peers at the national level,

while black and Hispanic students score lower. Most disturbing is the *66 percent* achievement gap between white students and black students in Washington, D.C.; the white-Hispanic gap, at 54 percent, is only slightly better. (Keep in mind that these scores are for public school students only and do not include any students who attend private schools.)

District	White Score	Black		Hispanic		Asian	
		Score	Gap	Score	Gap	Score	Gap
Nation	269	242	-27	245	-24	270	+1
Large central city	270	240	-30	243	-27	266	-4
District of Columbia	301	235	-66	247	-54	*	N/A
Houston	280	242	-38	245	-35	*	N/A
Austin	279	242	-37	243	-36	*	N/A
Charlotte	278	244	-34	248	-30	*	N/A
Boston	274	244	-30	248	-26	280	+6
San Diego	273	242	-31	241	-32	265	-8
Chicago	270	240	-30	251	-19	*	N/A
New York City	269	241	-28	247	-22	271	+2
Los Angeles	261	234	-27	235	-26	262	+1
Cleveland	255	236	-19	248	-7	*	N/A
Atlanta	*	237	N/A	*	N/A	*	N/A

*Reporting standards not met.

The complete report is available at
http://nationsreportcard.gov/tuda_reading_mathematics_2005/.



JINGLE ELLS: Alliance for Excellent Education Hosts Final Adolescent Literacy Breakfast for 2005

On December 6, the Alliance for Excellent Education held its fourth and final 2005 breakfast forum on the “Six Key Strategies for Teachers of English Language Learners,” a document created by the New Teacher Center (NTC) at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

At the forum’s outset, **Deborah Short, director of language education & academic development at the Center for Applied Linguistics**, gave a brief presentation on the explosive growth of English-language learners (ELL) over the last few years. She explained that ELL enrollment has grown more than 80 percent since the 1992–93 school year, versus about a 10 percent increase for total K–12 enrollment. In the 2002–03 school year, there were more than 5.1 million K–12 ELL students in the United States, and that number is expected to continue to grow. In fact, Short said that students whose first language is not English will comprise a greater proportion of school-age children than monolingual English speakers. This growth presents a great challenge to the American school system, since non-native English speakers must typically spend 4 to 7 years learning English to be able to perform as well academically as their native English-speaking peers.

Rain S. Bongolan, NTC’s development coordinator for ELL instruction and adolescent literacy, explained that the six strategies grew out of discussions between new teachers and mentor teachers on how to teach content to ELL students. The strategies are based on research that identifies effective methods for developing English-language learners’ content knowledge, use of the academic language associated with math, literature, history, and science, and basic interpersonal communication skills in English. As such, the six key strategies not only help

Alliance Hosts Final Adolescent Literacy Breakfast (Continued from p. 5)

students develop English as a second language, they also help native speakers learn words such as *algorithm* or *filibuster* that are not part of everyday English.

The six strategies are as follows:

- **Vocabulary and language development:** Teachers introduce new concepts by discussing vocabulary words key to that concept. For example, they will explore specific academic terms like *algorithm* and then begin a sequence of lessons on larger math concepts to build the student's background knowledge.
- **Guided interaction:** Teachers structure lessons so students work together to understand what they read—by listening, speaking, reading, and writing collaboratively about the academic concepts in the text.
- **Metacognition and authentic assessment:** Teachers model and explicitly teach thinking skills (*metacognition*) crucial to learning new concepts and use *authentic assessments* to check students' understanding.
- **Explicit instruction:** Direct teaching of concepts, academic language, and reading comprehension strategies needed to complete classroom tasks.
- **Meaning-based context and universal themes:** Teachers take something meaningful from the students' lives and use it to drive students' interest in academic concepts.
- **Modeling, graphic organizers, and visuals:** The use of a variety of visual aids, including pictures, diagrams, and charts, helps all students—and especially ELL students—easily recognize essential information and its relationship to supporting ideas. Visuals make both the language and the content more accessible to students.

In its work with beginning teachers, the NTC realized that native English-speaking students learning academic language (including words such as *algorithm* or *analogy*) faced many of the same challenges as ELL students. Therefore, the teachers began using the six key strategies to help native speakers understand the complex language used in their math, literature, science, and social studies classes.

It is difficult to discern the specific impact of the six key strategies on teacher practice and student achievement, because this tool is only one element in an array of training and assessment tools provided by the New Teacher Center. However, a long-term teacher retention rate as high as 95 percent—compared to a nationwide average around 50 percent—for teachers supported by the NTC model is a testament to the program's positive impact on the teaching profession. In addition, preliminary findings have shown that the six key strategies have a positive impact on student engagement, literacy skills, and teacher practice.

More information on the New Teacher Center is available at <http://www.newteachercenter.org/>.

Video from the Alliance event and supplemental materials are available at <http://www.all4ed.org/events/index.html>.

CALL FOR PRESENTERS: Alliance Accepting Proposals for 2006 Breakfast Series

The Alliance for Excellent Education is pleased to announce that it will extend its popular series of breakfast forums, highlighting successful practices in secondary education, through December 2006. The Alliance's breakfast forums, which are held four times a year in Washington, D.C., and attract about 150 people per session, offer an opportunity for policymakers, educators, researchers, advocates, the media, and others to learn and ask questions about some of the most successful programs and practices in the nation's middle and high schools.

Proposals to speak at the 2006 breakfast series are now being accepted and will be reviewed according to the following criteria:

- **Relevance:** Whereas previous forums have focused specifically on teaching strategies for struggling adolescent readers, the Alliance now welcomes presentations on a wide range of topics, including adolescent literacy, individual graduation plans and academic counseling, data-driven decisionmaking, including the use of data systems to track achievement and graduation rates, and teacher recruitment and retention.
- **Effectiveness:** Proposals should specify how the program has raised student achievement, increased attendance, decreased discipline problems, reduced dropout rates, improved teaching skills, reduced teacher turnover, and/or improved leadership and school climate. Some discussion of research-based design principles would be helpful as well.

Presenters should explain how they plan to illustrate lessons learned from their work, and they should discuss the implementation, sustainability, and scalability of the program, as well as the implications for school, district, state, and/or national education policy.

If interested, please submit a one-page proposal addressing the above criteria to Kathleen Mohr at kmohr@all4ed.org by **Monday, January 23, 2006**, with the subject line BREAKFAST PROPOSAL. If you have questions, feel free to contact Jeremy Ayers at 202-828-0828.

Selections will be announced and a presentation schedule will be released on February 6, 2006.

More information is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/events/index.html>.



Happy Holidays from the Alliance for Excellent Education!

The Alliance for Excellent Education wishes you and yours a happy holiday season and a wonderful 2005!

This issue marks the last one before the Alliance newsletter—although not the Alliance staff—settles in for a short winter's nap. The next issue of *Straight A's* will be dated January 9, 2006.

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.



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