



ALLIANCE FOR  
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

# StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **AMERICANS SPEAK ON EDUCATION: Public Credits Education System for U.S. Success in the World, but Worries About Future Unless Changes are Made in High Schools**

One-third of the American public believes the country's "public education system that offers everyone a chance to learn" is most responsible for the nation's success in the world, 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.

According to preliminary poll results from the Educational Testing Service (ETS), Americans' regard for the importance of the public education system as a reason for international stature was higher than for America's democratic system of government (31 percent) or its military strength and international presence (11 percent). But when asked their feelings on the effectiveness of American high schools, 76 percent expressed concern. In fact, 43 percent of respondents thought that if high schools do not improve over the next twenty-five years it would have a "very negative effect" on America's ability to compete in the world, and 33 percent of respondents said that no improvement would have a "somewhat negative effect."

These fears for the future are grounded in the reality of today. According to the Third International Math and Science Study, American fourth-graders are near the top in international comparisons when it comes to math and science, but by the 12th grade American students are near the bottom. In the Program for International Student Assessment, which compares international results in science and math every three years, the U.S. ranked 24th out of the 29 countries that were included in the survey. Additionally, after leading the world for decades, the United States now ranks 17th internationally in high school completion rates.

According to other results from the ETS survey, only 9 percent of Americans overall and 12 percent of teachers believe that high school students are "significantly challenged," and 30 percent of the public thinks that high school students are not challenged. When asked about the No Child Left Behind Act, 45 percent of all adults and 46 percent of K-12 parents had a favorable view the legislation—a sharp contrast to the 75 percent of high school teachers who hold an unfavorable opinion of the law.

These preliminary results are from a larger study, *Americans Speak on Education*, which will be released in mid-June and will provide more detail about how America's parents, teachers, and school administrators view the nation's education system and its high schools. The survey was based on key findings among 1,009 adults nationwide, plus an additional 180 parents of K-12 students, 150 parents of high school students, 300 high school administrators, and 300 high school teachers.

Highlights of the preliminary tracking data are available at <http://www.ets.org/news/index.html>.



## **PATHWAYS FOR ALL STUDENTS TO SUCCEED: New Senate Legislation Seeks to Raise Graduation Rates and Improve High Schools**

Legislation introduced in the U.S. Senate would work to improve the nation's high schools through a focus on math and literacy instruction and academic counseling. The Pathways for All Students to Succeed Act, or PASS Act, which was reintroduced by **Senator Patty Murray (D-WA)** on April 27, would also help to improve the accuracy of high school graduation rates and to turn around low-performing schools.

“The success of our high schools has very real consequences for our communities, our workforce, and our economy,” Senator Murray said. “For too many students, graduation and college seem out of reach. My PASS Act provides the tools our schools need to reach these students earlier and put them on a track to graduate.”

The bill notes that while the No Child Left Behind Act provides a strong framework for helping children in the early grades, the nation “needs a comprehensive strategy to address the literacy problems and learning gaps of students in middle school and secondary school.” To address these shortcomings at the secondary level, the PASS Act would authorize \$1 billion for literacy coaches who would work with middle and high school teachers and help them incorporate proven reading and writing instruction into their teaching. Because reading difficulties do not discriminate by subject, coaches would work with teachers across the curriculum to help them identify students who struggle with their assignments, whether in a math word problem or a social studies project.

In addition to the \$1 billion for literacy coaches, the PASS Act also authorizes \$1 billion for math coaches who would work with teachers in grades six through twelve on research-based mathematics instruction proven to help improve students' mathematical abilities and knowledge. Coaches would also work with teachers to identify students with problems in math and, if necessary, refer students to an appropriate remediation program. Both math and reading coaches would work closely with teachers at a ratio not to exceed one coach for every twenty teachers.

*Approximately 60 percent of students in the poorest communities fail to graduate from high school on time.* The act would authorize \$2 billion for academic counselors to help increase the number of students who graduate from high school while also improving college preparation for all students. Working with students and their families, academic counselors would develop a six-year personal plan for all students in their ninth-grade year which would define a student's career and education goals and map the courses needed for on-time high school graduation and successful preparation for postsecondary education or work. The plan would also identify the supplemental services necessary to meet those goals.

The bill would authorize \$500 million for low-performing schools to help them implement comprehensive reform models or research-based programs that have demonstrated success in raising student achievement. Examples of successful programs include smaller learning communities, adolescent literacy programs, block scheduling, whole school reforms, individualized learning plans, personalized learning environments, and strategies that target students making the transition from middle school to secondary school.

To better track the students affected by these reforms, the PASS Act would authorize \$50 million in grants to states to develop or increase the capacity of data systems for assessment and accountability purposes, including the collection of graduation rates.

Murray wrote the PASS Act based on proven research and practice on improving student achievement in the high school years, including the Alliance for Excellent Education's flagship report, *Every Child a Graduate*.

"The PASS Act, if enacted, will directly benefit the six million American students who are most at risk of dropping out of high school or graduating without a meaningful diploma," said **Bob Wise, former governor of West Virginia and president of the Alliance for Excellent Education**. "Most of these young people are unable to read and write well enough to take challenging classes. Few understand what courses they need to take at the secondary level to be prepared for college or a rewarding career. The large, impersonal schools that most of them attend cannot provide environments that support teaching and learning. The PASS Act will provide the kinds of supports to students and their schools that are needed if all of America's children are to graduate from high school prepared to be productive members of twenty-first-century society."

**Senators Richard Durbin (D-IL), Hillary Clinton (D-NY), and Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA), the ranking Democrat on the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee**, are cosponsors of the PASS Act.

Senator Murray's press release and a summary of the legislation are available at <http://www.murray.senate.gov/news.cfm?id=236977>.

The Alliance for Excellent Education's report *Every Child a Graduate* calls for the implementation of four research-based components to improve middle and high schools while raising graduation rates for at-risk students. It is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/EveryChildAGraduate/index.html>.



### **CONGRESS PASSES FISCAL 2006 BUDGET: \$5.4 Billion Education Amendment Dropped in House-Senate Conference Negotiations**

After spending several weeks negotiating the differences between House and Senate versions of the congressional budget resolution, which sets limits on the spending and tax legislation that Congress will consider this year, both chambers finally came to an agreement on April 28. The final version caps discretionary spending at \$843 billion and calls for \$106 billion in tax cuts over the next five years, but fails to include \$5.4 billion for education programs that passed with bipartisan support in the Senate. The \$843 billion spending cap corresponds to the president's cap in his proposed budget.

"The essence of this budget comes down to whether we're going to stick our children and grandchildren with a government they can't afford," said **Senate Budget Committee Chairman Judd Gregg (R-NH)**. "This budget takes a modest but important first step toward entitlement

## **Congress Passes Fiscal 2006 Budget**

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reform, cuts the short-term deficit in half, puts important tools in place so Congress can enforce spending discipline, and improves transparency and good budget practices.”

Democrats were quick to counter Gregg’s assertion that the budget would cut the deficit, noting that while the budget calls for \$106 billion in tax cuts over the next five years, it would trim mandatory spending programs by just \$34.7 billion during the same period. They added that future budget projections did not include expenses such as long-term costs for the Iraq war and technical modifications to the tax code.

“Sad to say, the country would be better off with no budget plan than with this one,” said **Robert Greenstein, executive director of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities**. “Without it, deficits would be lower, and cuts in programs for the needy wouldn’t be imposed to pay for more tax cuts for the wealthiest.”

According to *CQ Weekly*, in order to meet the limits established in the budget resolution, Congress will have to cut spending outside of defense and homeland security by 1 percent in fiscal 2006 and freeze programs for the next four years thereafter. The pressure to keep these programs frozen—including popular programs in education, veterans, transportation, and the environment—will only get stronger as agencies struggle to keep up with inflation and population growth.

In addition to cuts to discretionary spending, the budget resolution also calls for an additional \$34.7 billion in cuts to mandatory programs in fiscal 2006 and a total of \$212 billion over the five-year life of the budget. While the budget cannot order cuts to specific programs, the largest program reductions are likely to come from Medicaid (\$10 billion), the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (\$6.6 billion), student loan programs (\$4.7 billion), and programs under the agriculture committees (\$3 billion).

Like the budget for an individual family, the congressional budget resolution serves as a spending blueprint for Congress that tracks expenses (government spending) versus income (tax revenue). While the budget resolution does not actually allocate money to programs—that task is left to the Appropriations Committee—Congress cannot exceed the cap it sets on discretionary spending (\$843 billion).

Last week, in the next step in the budget process, **Appropriations Committee Chairman Jerry Lewis (R-CA)** divvied up the \$843 billion among ten subcommittees. Under his allocation, the House Labor, HHS, and Education Appropriations subcommittee would receive \$142.51 billion, \$924 million above the president’s request but \$163 million less than last year. Chairman Lewis is determined to complete action on all eleven appropriations bills by the July 4 recess, with a markup of the House Labor, HHS, and Education appropriations bill expected to occur in the first half of June.



## **STUDYING THE PAST TO IMPACT TODAY: RAND Examines Narrowing of the Achievement Gap from 1972 to 1992, Makes Recommendations for Today**

Improved socioeconomic conditions such as parents' occupational status, educational attainment, and income all corresponded to a narrowing of the black-white and Latino-white achievement gaps in reading and math scores from 1972 to 1992, according to a new report from the RAND Corporation. The report, *Examining the Gaps in Mathematics Achievement Among Racial-Ethnic Groups, 1972–1992*, also found a very positive change in test scores as a result of increased enrollments of black and Latino students in more rigorous courses.

Using data from the three national longitudinal studies and the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the RAND report examined nationally representative high school seniors between the early 1970s and the early 1990s to understand trends in the mathematics scores of different racial-ethnic groups. It found that while achievement gaps remained wide during this period, black and Latino students made significant progress in closing the test score gap in both reading and math: the black-white gap was reduced by 20 percent, and the Latino-white gap was reduced by 32 percent.

According to the report, some of the most significant improvements in minority test scores were due to increased enrollments of black and Latino students in the “academic track.” While the number of white students on an academic track stayed consistent at about 50 percent from 1972 to 1992, enrollments of black students increased by 13 percent and Latino students by 37 percent. These increased numbers translated to nearly 60 percent narrowing of the black-white mathematics gap between 1972 and 1992 and a 34 percent decrease in the Latino-white gap.

The report did note one negative factor during the period that worked against the narrowing of the achievement gap. When it examined schools that black and Latinos students attended, the report found schools that were racially isolated and composed of predominantly minority students, a factor which, it noted, has been shown to negatively affect student achievement. In fact, the report found that increases in the minority composition of high schools that black and Latino students attended corresponded to a widening of the test score gap with white students.

Based on its findings from this twenty-year period, the report made several policy recommendations to help close the achievement gap that exists today. For schools, the report called for educational policies and reforms that address secondary school tracking and the increasing isolation of minority students in predominately minority schools. It also noted that “educational policies and reforms that require students to take college preparatory courses like mathematics are likely to further narrow the achievement gap, or at least keep it from widening.” After seeing the achievement gap narrow as parents' socioeconomic conditions improved, the report also called for greater support for the advancement of parents' educational attainment, occupational attainment, and wages, and more federal and state support for parent involvement in a child's schooling.

The report also stressed the importance of understanding that family and welfare policies need to be coordinated with educational policies. “Without thinking about how educational policies complement or conflict with policies related to spheres such as welfare, work, and housing, the goal of narrowing achievement gaps will continue to face significant obstacles,” it read.

The complete report is available at <http://www.rand.org/publications/MG/MG255/>.



## **IS IGNORANCE BLISS? New Survey Finds a Public Largely Unaware of the High School Dropout Problem and Its Effect on the Economy**

Only one in ten Americans believe the high school dropout problem is a crisis, according to a new survey commissioned by Communities In Schools (CIS) and conducted by Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates. The survey, conducted from January 26 through January 31, found that while most respondents associated high school dropouts with economic and social problems, they consistently underestimated the actual number of dropouts, and vastly underestimated the percentage of prison inmates who failed to complete high school.

“This is a national crisis,” said **Daniel J. Cardinali, the national president of CIS**, a community-based organization that is dedicated to helping kids stay in school and prepare for life. “The time has come to expand the issue of high school dropouts from a concern about helping individual youth to a much broader societal issue. We have to do something to grab people’s attention, because one out of three students in America is dropping out of school. Some people may not be able to see the impact today, but it will be hard to miss in a few years. We are facing a major labor crisis, not to mention a loss in tax revenue—because if we keep on this path, one in five Americans will never enter the labor force.”

When asked what they thought was the solution to the dropout problem, 80 percent of respondents believed increases in government funding and small, alternative schools were necessary. According to the survey, 76 percent of Americans thought a connection existed between dropping out of high school and crime, and 69 percent believed there was a correlation between dropouts and welfare costs. However, only 45 percent of respondents understood that the high number of dropouts will significantly decrease Social Security revenue.

More information on the survey is available at <http://www.prnewswire.com/mnr/cisnet/21786/>.



## **A CALL TO ACTION: High School Alliance Issues Six-Point Framework for Transforming High Schools**

A new report provides leaders at the national, state, district, school, and community levels with a common framework for building public will, developing supportive policies, and then implementing the practices needed to radically change the traditional, factory-model high school that tracks and sorts students. The report, *A Call to Action: Transforming High School for All Youth*, released by the National High School Alliance (HS Alliance), provides civic and policy leaders with a framework of six core principles and recommended strategies for preparing all students for college, careers, and active civic participation.

The report is the result of the HS Alliance’s work over the past two years to tap the expertise of its diverse partnership of more than forty national organizations. During that time, the HS Alliance asked its partners what it took to produce high academic achievement, close the achievement gap, and promote civic and personal growth among all high school–age youth. In its

research, the HS Alliance identified six core principles, which it labeled as “inter-related and non-negotiable,” to improving high schools, which are as follows:

- personalized learning environments;
- academic engagement of all students;
- empowered educators;
- accountable leaders;
- engaged community and youth; and
- integrated system of high standards, curriculum, instruction, assessments, and supports.

“To create deep and lasting change, all six core principles must be addressed,” the report reads. “The principles are interdependent and must function as part of a comprehensive plan that focuses on ensuring that all students are ready for college, careers, and active civic participation.”

More information on the report is available at <http://www.hsalliance.org/>.

### **Governors Seek Input from Students on Redesigning the American High School**

As part of its yearlong campaign to redesign the American high school, the National Governors Association (NGA) is reaching out to students to learn their expectations and frustrations with the nation’s high schools. The survey will give governors valuable insight into the high school experience of today and acts as a tool to involve students involved in the debate.

“The voice of students has been missing in this conversation about high school reform that has been going on among the experts and policymakers,” said **NGA Chairman and Virginia Governor Mark Warner (D)**, who has made the focus on high schools his chairman’s initiative. “The Class of 2005 may have the best ideas we need. If the students we are trying to help don’t see the value of redesigning high school, we are wasting our time.”

Last month, NGA released the initial results from the survey, which was launched in February. Even though statistics say otherwise, most of America’s high school students believe they are adequately prepared in basic reading, math, and science skills. The rest, about one third, say their high schools are not properly preparing them in many areas that are vital to their future success, such as the ability to think critically, analyze problems, and communicate effectively. About 43 percent do not believe that they are acquiring practical and essential life skills from high school, while a third feel overlooked by their high school.

NGA will release the complete survey results prior to their annual meeting, scheduled for this summer in Des Moines. The survey is available at <http://www.rateyourfuture.org/>.

**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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