



ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



TAKING THE NEXT STEP: Alliance's Third Annual High School Policy Conference Focuses on Defining a Shared Federal Agenda for High School Reform

From the Capitol to the classroom, America is debating how to improve its high schools. Within the last year, everyone, from President Bush to Bill Gates and Oprah Winfrey, has issued calls to improve results for high school students in the United States. There is wide agreement that too few students graduate with the skills they need to excel in college, at the workplace, and in order to be contributing members of society. Given the glaring inequities and significant achievement gaps among students at the secondary school level, as well as the critical need for high schools to prepare young people for success in an increasingly global economy, there is no doubt that the federal government will play an integral role in high school reform. However, although research and practice can inform *what* to do to improve high schools, there is a lack of consensus on *how* to do it and on *who* should lead the charge.

On October 12–13, nearly 350 educators, policymakers, school reformers, media, and others attended the Alliance for Excellent Education's 3rd Annual High School Policy Conference to address these questions and build a consensus regarding the federal role in high school improvement.

Looking toward the coming reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, speakers and panelists discussed ways that some of the major themes in contemporary educational reform—such as standards, accountability, alignment, and teacher quality—might be reconsidered in light of the particular challenges facing the upper grades. If Congress gives high schools a more prominent place in federal policy, what are the opportunities for advocates, and what mistakes should they avoid? was just one of the questions raised during the conference.

“High school reform is newer and far more complicated than other education improvement projects,” warned **Michael Cohen, president of Achieve, Inc.**, sounding a note of caution that was repeated throughout the conference. “The schools themselves are more complex institutions, and the students are more complex individuals.” Moreover, as a number of speakers pointed out, high school students face a very different world than the one that confronted previous generations. Never before have policymakers required schools to set the bar so high.

Although presenters largely agreed that high school students must reach higher levels of knowledge and skills, they disagreed somewhat about what must be done to increase the rigor of high school course work and to align standards, curricula, and assessments with the skills in math and English that are necessary for success after high school.

Taking the Next Step (Continued from p. 1)

How can policymakers balance a natural caution to act in a complicated arena with the even more pressing need to prepare students for the 21st century economy? Of the themes that emerged over the course of two days of lively discussion and debate, no message was repeated more often than the recommendation that NCLB lean heavily toward positive incentives at the secondary level, relying on “carrots more than sticks” to improve teaching, curriculum, assessment, and other aspects of high school education. As **Andrew Rotherham, founder and co-director of Education Sector**, stated as he introduced a panel on teacher quality, “Smart federal policies can help...by funding innovation that spotlights and accelerates change at the state and district levels.”

Audio and video from the conference, as well as a complete list of conference speakers, are currently available at <http://www.all4ed.org/events/2006HSCconference/index.html>. A written proceedings of the conference will be available in a few weeks.

Striving Readers Grantees Honored at the Alliance’s High School Policy Conference

The Alliance for Excellent Education honored six of the eight Striving Readers grantees at a reception following the first day of its High School Policy Conference.

“Striving Readers is the only federal reading program for middle and high schools,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education**. “Funded at only \$29.7 million last year, it’s small by federal standards, but because it serves as the cornerstone of high school reform, it is vitally important. The good news is that funding has increased since last year, and we hope it continues to grow so it can help more districts in the future. The need is certainly there.”

Marcia Kingman, director of Striving Readers at the U.S. Department of Education, was on hand to recognize and thank the grantees for their hard work on behalf of students. She also thanked the Alliance for its efforts to draw attention to the program through advocacy and publications such as *Reading Next*, which outlines the best available research on how to improve results for struggling older readers and which calls on public and private stakeholders to invest in the literacy of middle and high school students today while simultaneously building the knowledge base around adolescent literacy.

The honorees in attendance were **Kenya Sadler, director of Striving Readers**, representing Chicago Public Schools; **Bob Rowland, superintendent**, and **Win Smith, principal, Danville (KY) High School**; **Amy Awbrey, program design and research coordinator, the Collaborative for Teaching and Learning**; **Felicia Cummings-Smith, associate director, Collaborative Center for Literacy Development**, and **Latricia Bronger, instructor of special education at the University of Louisville**, representing the Danville (KY) School District; **Dr. Carol Johnson, superintendent**, and **Dr. Ric Potts, director of Secondary Literacy**, representing Memphis (TN) City Schools; **Dr. Gayle Griffin, assistant superintendent**, representing Newark (NJ) Public Schools; **Lisa Crider, project director**, representing the Ohio Department of Youth Services; and **Matt Rigney, interim project director**, representing Springfield-Chicopee (MA) Public Schools. The Multnomah County (OR) School District #1 and San Diego Unified School District also received Striving Readers grants but were unable to send a representative.

The reception also featured award-winning **filmmaker and producer Moctesuma Esparza**, who showed a clip from his most recent film, *Walkout*. The film is based on actual events from a 1968 protest by Latino high schoolers in East Los Angeles, which resulted in the students boycotting classes to send a message regarding the unequal education that they were receiving.

More information on *Walkout* is available at <http://www.hbo.com/films/walkout/>.



LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF U.S. HIGH SCHOOL SOPHOMORES REVEALS HIGHER ACADEMIC ASPIRATIONS, UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

High school sophomores in 2002 were more likely to spend more time on homework, more likely to be in a college preparatory program, and more likely to envision a college degree at the end of their educational careers than their counterparts in 1980. Results from *United States High School Sophomores: A Twenty-Two Year Comparison, 1980–2002*, a new report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) also finds that while student achievement in math and English increased since 1980, most of the gains were obtained between 1980 and 1990, with very little improvement from 1990 to 2002.

Compared to their counterparts in 1980, high school sophomores in 2002 had higher aspirations for themselves after high school. Based on the data, 80 percent of the 2002 sophomores expected to obtain a four-year college or postgraduate degree after high school, an increase of 39 percentage points over 1980. Among student racial and ethnic groups, 86.9 percent of Asian Americans, 81 percent of whites, 76.9 percent of African Americans, 75.9 percent of American Indians, and 72.6 percent of Hispanics reported that they expect to obtain their college degree, at minimum.

However, well over half of these students will likely fail to achieve their goal. According to research published by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, only one-third of all ninth grade students leave high school with a diploma and with the abilities and qualifications to even be considered for admission to a four-year college. Among minority students, the percentages are even lower, as only 23 percent of African-American students and 20 percent of Hispanic students leave school college-ready, compared with 40 percent of white students.

To their credit, high school sophomores in 2002 worked harder in high school in an effort to better prepare themselves for college. In fact, between 1980 and 2002, the percentage of high school sophomores who were in a college preparatory or academic program increased by 18 percent. In addition, sophomores in 2002 spent more time on homework, with 37 percent devoting more than ten hours per week to homework versus 7 percent in 1980. In 2002, 77 percent reported spending at least three hours a week on homework, compared to 54 percent in 1980.

Some of the students' hard work appears to have paid off. In 2002, high school sophomores posted higher scores in math than their counterparts did in 1990 and 1980, but the amount of improvement declined from 1990 to 2002. In 2002, sophomores had a mean math score of 37.6, versus 36.5 in 1990 and 32.8 in 1980. A closer look at racial and ethnic subgroups reveals that while American Indian, Asian-American and white students continued to improve from 1990 to 2002, black students saw their scores level off, and Hispanic students' scores actually declined.

In reading, the percentage of high school sophomores who achieved at "level 1"—an ability to demonstrate skill in simple reading comprehension, including reproduction of detail or the author's main thought—declined from 91.1 percent in 1990 to 89.4 percent in 2002. Level 1 is the most basic of the three levels measured by the report.

The complete report is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2006327>.

Advancing Literacy: Carnegie Corporation of New York Launches New Website

In 2003, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, in collaboration with the nation's leading practitioners and researchers, conducted an extensive review of education research around literacy instruction. The survey revealed that the knowledge base around the teaching of reading was very limited after the third grade. As a result, the Corporation created "Advancing Literacy," a subprogram of its education division and charged it with the challenging task of advancing literacy by affecting policy, practice, and research. As part of that effort, the Corporation recently launched a website devoted to disseminating research and to sharing effective practices for teaching reading to older students.

In addition to providing tools for policymakers, parents, and educators, the website also includes resources on the current state of adolescent literacy. They explain why adolescent literacy matters and which adolescents are most at risk.

As part of its Advancing Literacy program, the Corporation plans to continue to identify, evaluate, fund, and promote information sharing, research, and policy initiatives designed to remediate the crisis in adolescent literacy until it sees evidence that the crisis has been resolved.

More information is available at <http://www.carnegie.org/literacy/index.html>.



THE AMERICAN TEACHER: EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES: MetLife Survey Finds Teacher Career Satisfaction at a Twenty-Year High; However, One Quarter of All Teachers Expect to Leave Profession in Five Years

A new survey from MetLife Foundation finds that teacher career satisfaction is at a twenty-year high, but also that retaining teachers is as difficult today as it was two decades ago. According to this year's survey, *The American Teacher, 2006: Expectations and Experiences*, 56 percent of teachers are very satisfied with their careers. However, the report cautions that the number of teachers likely to change careers has stayed the same.

Since 1984, MetLife has sponsored this annual survey of teachers to find out how satisfied they are with their careers and to determine why so many leave when they do. This year's survey of K–12 teachers, principals, education school deans and chairpersons examines the state of the profession at key points throughout the life cycle of a teacher's career, from preparation in college and graduate school, to experiences in the nation's K–12 schools.

"America's teachers represent a critical bridge between this country's present and future success," said **MetLife Chairman and CEO Rob Henrikson**. "Ensuring that we have the best public education system possible is everyone's responsibility, which is why MetLife has commissioned the *Survey of the American Teacher* for more than two decades. With almost half of all teachers exiting the profession in their first five years, we need to develop actionable strategies to strengthen our public schools by keeping good teachers in them. As these results demonstrate, a dangerous gap exists between expectation and experience, making it more difficult to attract and retain teachers."

Although teacher career satisfaction was at a twenty-year high, teachers continued to express disappointment with certain aspects of their job. Based on the survey, 65 percent of teachers said that they did not have enough time for planning and grading. In addition, 60 percent said that they did not have enough time to help individual students, and 34 percent said they lacked time for classroom instruction.

According to the report, more than one in four teachers (27 percent) said that they were likely to leave the profession within the next five years. By examining survey responses from teachers, the report's authors were able to create a profile of a teacher who is at risk of leaving the profession. They found that the most significant predictor is whether a teacher is assigned to classes he or she does not feel qualified to teach. In fact, teachers assigned to classes that they feel unqualified to teach were 1.9 times more likely to leave. Age also plays a role, with older teachers more likely to leave.

The biggest factor in retaining a teacher was pairing him or her with a mentor. "Having a mentor during the first year of teaching significantly increases the odds that a teacher will stay in the profession," the report reads. The role that a mentor can play for a beginning teacher is especially valuable given some of the concerns that beginning teachers expressed. For example, 26 percent of teachers said that they were not prepared to work with children with varying abilities during their first teaching positions. In addition, 20 percent said that they were not prepared to maintain order and discipline in the classroom.

The good news is that pairing beginning teachers with a mentor is becoming more of a common practice than it was ten or twenty years ago. In fact, 82 percent of new teachers (defined in the report as teachers who have been in the profession for less than five years) said that they were matched with a more experienced mentor during their first year of teaching. Among older teachers, only 51 percent of teachers with six to twenty years of experience and only 16 percent of teachers with more than twenty-one years of experience were paired with a mentor during their first year of teaching.

When deans and chairpersons in schools of education were asked for their solutions to keep teachers from leaving the profession, 90 percent said that a decent salary for teachers was an important step that needed to be made. They also listed more respect for teachers in today's society (82 percent), increased financial support for the school system (72 percent), and more opportunities for professional development (71 percent). When principals were asked the same question, they listed a decent salary and more respect as their number one and number two choices, respectively, but 80 percent also listed more time for teachers to discuss their needs and problems with other teachers as a valid solution.

When teachers were surveyed, they also listed a decent salary (92 percent), increased financial support for the school system (84 percent), and more respect for teachers (82 percent) as ways to keep more teachers in the profession. However, they also suggested having better tools and supplies (74 percent), providing time for teachers to discuss their needs and problems with other teachers (73 percent), and reducing the amount of time that teachers spend in non-teaching duties (68 percent). Teachers were less likely to believe that more opportunities for professional development would help keep them in the profession.

"They should implement a mentor program and stick with it," said **Mindy T., a prospective teacher quoted in the report**. "A bad tactic is letting veteran teachers pick and choose what kids they want before scheduling is done so that the brand new teachers are left with all of the bad kids. That's the fastest way to lose a highly qualified teacher."

The complete report is available at

<http://www.metlife.com/Applications/Corporate/WPS/CDA/PageGenerator/0,4132,P13393,00.html>.

Reality Check: Survey Reveals Disconnect Between School Superintendents and Classroom Teachers Regarding Whether Students “Slip Through the Cracks”

There is a major disconnect between teachers and superintendents over whether students are slipping through the cracks. In fact, according to *Reality Check 2006: Issue No. 4: The Insiders*, the latest in a set of public opinion tracking surveys on education from Public Agenda, 62 percent of teachers, compared to only 27 percent of superintendents, say that students are slipping through the education system without learning.

“With such vastly different sets of perceptions, you really have to wonder whether these people are working at cross purposes,” said **Jean Johnson, executive director of Public Agenda’s Education Insights Division** and author of the report. “It’s probably natural for principals and superintendents to be upbeat about their institutions and employees, but still, I think the positive, almost buoyant outlook captured here may come as a surprise to a lot of school reformers and critics.”

In a Public Agenda roundtable discussion concerning the survey on October 13, **Dr. Wendy Robinson, superintendent of Fort Wayne (IN) Community Schools**, explained that superintendents needed to become more connected to the classroom and to have more personal involvement with their teachers if they were to understand the challenges that teachers face.

During the event, discussion turned to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. **Peter McWalters, Rhode Island commissioner of elementary and secondary education**, said that the education system is completely unconnected to 40 percent of the students. He explained that his district “looks perfectly normal on paper,” but that 40 percent of the district is performing at the 20 percent level, and 60 percent of the district is performing at 80 percent. While he spoke positively about NCLB, its accountability systems, and the attention it pays to student performance, he also asked for more support and resources. “You’ve got my attention with a 2 x 4. Now can I get a little help?” he said.

The complete Public Agenda survey is available at
http://publicagenda.org/specials/realitycheck06/realitycheck06_main.htm.



NEA UNVEILS PLAN TO ADDRESS HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT CRISIS

Saying that “we’ve identified the crisis, and it will take everyone sharing responsibility to correct it,” **National Education Association (NEA) President Reg Weaver** unveiled a twelve-point plan to address the high school dropout crisis in the United States. The plan represents the combined efforts of parents, teachers, business leaders and lawmakers to present a comprehensive strategy to target high school dropouts.

“This is no longer about students slipping through the cracks of our educational system,” Weaver said. “Those cracks are now craters.”

One of the more intriguing parts of the NEA’s plan is a proposal to mandate high school graduation or an equivalent as compulsory for every person under the age of twenty-one. In addition to requiring students to stay in school until age twenty-one, the NEA plan would also create “high school graduation centers” that would cater to the needs of older students and provide specialized instruction and counseling in an environment separate from classes of younger students. For younger students, the plan proposes smaller learning communities within large schools and class sizes of eighteen or fewer students.

The dropout plan also proposes “creative partnerships with community colleges in career and technical fields and with alternative schools” so that students have another way to earn a high school diploma. In another effort to more closely tie school and work, the NEA would increase career education and workforce readiness programs in schools.

A key part of the plan involves reaching out to students before they become a dropout risk. The NEA would provide high-quality preschool and full-day kindergarten to ensure that students get off to a good start and follow that up with strong elementary programs that ensure students are doing grade-level work when they enter middle school. For middle school students, the plan envisions programs that address early signs causes of dropping out while providing access to rigorous courses such as algebra, science, and others that serve as the foundation for success in high school and beyond.

Data are also of great importance in the NEA plan, which calls for states to adopt the standardized graduation rate reporting method developed by the National Governors Association and agreed to by most of the nation’s governors. The plan also stresses the importance of the family and community in ensuring that students remain in school. For example, it recommends that employers institute family-friendly policies that provide release time for employees to attend parent-teacher conferences and work schedules for high school students that enable them to attend classes on time, ready to learn.

The final part of the NEA’s plan involves resources. Educators should “have the training and resources they need to prevent students from dropping out,” the report reads. It lists professional development for teachers that is focused on the needs of diverse students and students who are at risk of dropping out. Other supports needed include up-to-date textbooks and materials, computers and other information technology, and safe, modern schools. The report also calls on Congress and the president to “make high school graduation a federal priority” by investing \$10 billion over the next ten years to support dropout prevention programs and states that make high school graduation compulsory.

Bethany Little, the Alliance for Excellent Education’s vice president for policy and federal advocacy, noted that the NEA has a critical role to play in the high school reform debate. “Given that the NEA represents 3 million teachers on the front lines of the battle, it’s hard to imagine winning the war without them,” she said.

More information on the NEA’s twelve-point dropout plan is available at <http://www.nea.org/newsreleases/2006/nr061003.html>.

Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events both in Washington, DC, 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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In this issue:

- Taking the Next Step: Alliance's Third Annual High School Policy Conference Focuses on Defining a Shared Federal Agenda for High School Reform
- Longitudinal Study of U.S. High School Sophomores Reveals Higher Academic Aspirations, Unrealistic Expectations
- *The American Teacher: Expectations and Experiences*: MetLife Survey Finds Teacher Career Satisfaction at a Twenty-Year High; However, One Quarter of All Teachers Expect to Leave Profession in Five Years
- NEA Unveils Plan to Address High School Dropout Crisis



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