



ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



WRITING NEXT: New Alliance Report Trumpets Writing as an Important Component to Literacy Instruction and as a Predictor of Academic Success

Along with reading comprehension, writing skill is a predictor of academic success and a basic requirement for participation in civic life and the global economy. However, every year in the United States, large numbers of students graduate from high school unable to write well enough to meet the needs of employers or colleges. So says *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools*, a new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education that focuses on the importance of good writing skills to a student's future success and offers new insights about techniques that will improve writing instruction for secondary students.

"Reading proficiency is just half of the literacy picture," said **Bob Wise, former governor of West Virginia and president of the Alliance for Excellent Education**. "We have to widen the literacy spotlight to include writing as well as reading. Increasing students' writing abilities increases their literacy abilities, which, in turn, increases the likelihood that they will stay in school and graduate. And that means they have a much better chance for future success."

Although reading and writing are both vital aspects of literacy, they each require their own dedicated instruction. What improves reading does not always improve writing. In addition, many adolescents are able to handle average reading demands but have severe difficulties with writing. *Writing Next* is meant to respond to the strong need for information about how to improve classroom writing instruction to address the serious problem of adolescent writing difficulty. In this way, *Writing Next* is a companion piece to another Alliance report, *Reading Next*, which helped to jumpstart discussion around improving reading instruction for adolescents.

"My hope, indeed my expectation, is that this new report, *Writing Next*, will help give rise to precisely the same kind of groundswell of attention and energy as *Reading Next* gave to adolescent reading, focused this time on the writing skills of America's adolescents," Wise said at a release event for *Writing Next* on October 19.

However, unlike *Reading Next*, which presents general methods and interventions that are useful for improving reading instruction, *Writing Next* highlights specific teaching techniques that work in the classroom. During the release event, the report's authors, **Dr. Steve Graham, professor of special education and literacy at Vanderbilt University**, and **Dr. Dolores Perin, associate professor of psychology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University**, explained how they were able to use a powerful statistical method, known as meta-analysis, to summarize existing research on writing instruction and to highlight the practices that hold the most promise. In addition, they were also able to identify eleven classroom practices that, as research suggests,

will help improve the writing abilities of fourth- to twelfth-grade students. (A table of these practices is available on page 3).

Writing Skills Are More Important Now Than Ever Before

The 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in writing shows that very large numbers of adolescents need interventions to help them become better writers. In fact, 72 percent of fourth graders, 69 percent of eighth graders, and 77 percent of twelfth graders failed to score at the “proficient” level on the NAEP.

Having large percentages of high school students with low writing scores seems to imply that too many college students will lack the writing skills they need to succeed. **Dr. Ron Williams, president of Prince George’s County Community College** in Maryland, confirmed this belief during the panel discussion at the *Writing Next* release. First, he acknowledged that the best-prepared students and the worst-prepared students did not attend community colleges and said that most of the students he sees fit somewhere in the middle of those two categories. Among those students, however, he said that approximately 70 percent need remediation, with about one-third in need of additional help in writing. He added that the global nature of today’s society means that an individual’s introduction to someone else will most likely occur through the written word (emails, research papers, etc.) rather than face-to-face.

Indeed, the explosion of electronic and wireless communication into everyday life has brought writing skills into play “as never before,” according to the report. It finds that not only have good writing skills become critical in the workplace, but also they often play a large part in hiring and promotion decisions. As **Dr. Anthony Carnevale, a senior fellow at the National Center on Education and the Economy**, explained at the release event, human interaction in the 21st century is increasingly through computers, rather than face-to-face. “It’s relatively clear that the modern economy and the competencies required in the 21st century lean more and more towards basic reading and writing kinds of functions,” he said.

Ed Hardin, a senior content specialist for the College Board who oversees the new writing portion of the SAT, spoke about the level of writing that he currently sees from high school students. “We see kids who come in with that five-paragraph structure; they fit everything into this little shoebox and can do a decent job, but on our six-point scale, those kids typically do no better than a 4,” he said. “The kids who get those 5s and 6s are kids ...[whose] teachers go beyond the specific approaches that work for all kids and focus on things than can [help the individuals] develop a little bit further.”

As **Dr. James McPartland, professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins University**, explained at the release, teaching students how to write can be difficult for many teachers. “Humans learn by seeing an expert demonstrate [something] before them and then practice it,” he said. However, he explained that it is difficult for a teacher to impart the complexities of writing and to reveal what goes on in his or her mind during the process. To assist teachers, McPartland would provide them with more time to work and plan together, as well as access to “writing coaches,” experts who can work with teachers and instruct them on how to teach writing.

In his remarks, **Paul LeMahieu, director of research and evaluation at the National Writing Project**, addressed what it would take to improve students' writing skills. "We need individual leadership and championship that can secure the collective will that it's going to take to put [improving writing] on the agenda," he said. He added that more teachers at the secondary level need to be involved in the teaching of reading and writing. "This is both a challenge and a necessity during the adolescent years, as the curriculum becomes more topically focused and more content oriented and with it the tendency for some to exclude themselves from the responsibility for teaching reading and writing," he said. "We need to make literacy acquisition and writing in particular a responsibility of all of our teachers."

During the question and answer portion of the event, panel moderator **Sandy Kress, a partner at the law firm Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld LLP** and former senior advisor to President Bush on education with respect to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, addressed which policy levers could drive a more systemic focus on writing. "It seems to me that the decision of the SAT [to have] a prominent writing aspect of that test—that itself is going to drive policy," he said. "As for how you drive it more systemically, it would take an emphasis through, in my own judgment, assessment and accountability."

The complete report is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/WritingNext/index.html>.

Audio and video from the release event are available at <http://www.all4ed.org/events/WritingNext/WritingNext.html>.

Eleven Elements of Effective Adolescent Writing Instruction

The "Eleven Elements of Effective Adolescent Writing Instruction" identified in *Writing Next* appear below. The report is careful to note that, although all of the elements are supported by rigorous research and have shown clear results for improving students' writing, they do not constitute a full writing curriculum—even when used together. They can, however, be combined in flexible ways to strengthen adolescents' literacy development.

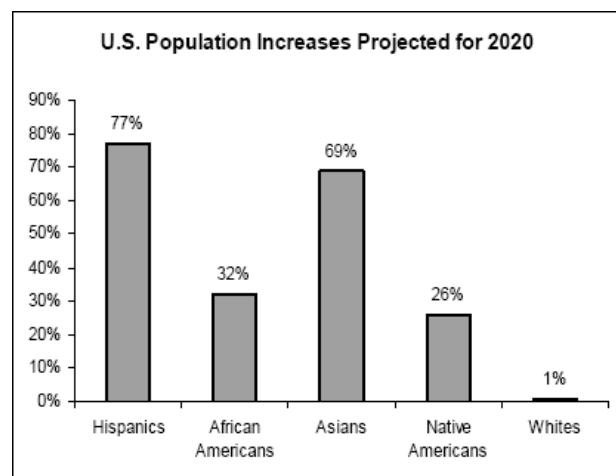
1. **Writing Strategies**, which involves teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions
2. **Summarization**, which involves explicitly and systematically teaching students how to summarize texts
3. **Collaborative Writing**, which uses instructional arrangements in which adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions
4. **Specific Product Goals**, which assigns students specific, reachable goals for the writing they are to complete
5. **Word Processing**, which uses computers and word processors as instructional supports for writing assignments
6. **Sentence Combining**, which involves teaching students to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences
7. **Prewriting**, which engages students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition
8. **Inquiry Activities**, which engages students in analyzing immediate, concrete data to help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing task
9. **Process Writing Approach**, which interweaves a number of writing instructional activities in a workshop environment that stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing
10. **Study of Models**, which provides students with opportunities to read, analyze, and emulate models of good writing
11. **Writing for Content Learning**, which uses writing as a tool for learning content material



DEMOGRAPHY AS DESTINY: Alliance Finds that Low Minority Graduation Rates and Rising Minority Populations Could Jeopardize the Nation's Economic Future

The nation's future economic well-being will weaken considerably unless it increases the percentage of minority students who graduate from high school to at least the level of their white classmates, according to a new issue brief by the Alliance for Excellent Education. The brief, *Demography as Destiny: How America Can Build a Better Future*, which was funded by MetLife Foundation, finds that if the nation's high schools and colleges were to raise the graduation rates of Hispanic, African-American, and Native-American students to the levels of white students by 2020, the potential increase in personal income across the nation would add more than \$310 billion to the U.S. economy.

Currently, only about 70 percent of all American high school students graduate in four years, but the figures are even bleaker for minority populations. Only 52 percent of Hispanic, 56 percent of African-American, and 57 percent of Native-American students graduate on time, compared to 78 percent of white students. Using estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, the report notes that the U.S. population is expected to grow from just over 282 million in 2000 to almost 336 million in 2020. During that time, the minority population will grow at a considerably faster pace than the overall population, as demonstrated in the chart to the right.



According to the report, as minority populations become larger as a percentage of the population, their low graduation rates must be improved; otherwise, the national graduation rate will begin to fall below its current 70 percent as a growing number of minority students are left behind.

“By 2020, the adult population aged 25 to 64 will be 63 percent white, 17 percent Hispanic, 13 percent African American, 6 percent Asian, and around 1 percent Native American,” the report reads. “So, unless Hispanic, African-American, and Native-American students are better served by schools to ensure increased graduation rates, the percentage of students attaining high school diplomas and college degrees will decrease.”

The brief notes that although there is a general understanding of the importance of closing the nation's educational achievement gap, less recognized is the fact that the segment of the population that is the least well educated is also the fastest growing. Using estimates from **Patrick Kelly, a senior associate at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems**, the brief notes that the percentage of adults aged 25 to 64 with a high school diploma or higher will decrease by 2.5 percentage points from its current level by 2020.

Unaddressed, this circumstance alone will mean significant reductions in the knowledge and skill levels of the U.S. workforce. It will also mean dramatically lower levels of personal income, leading to a reduced tax base for the nation and the states. Based on current educational disparities and Census population projects, the U.S. population in 2020 will include seven million more adults who have not completed high school than it does today.

However, the report argues that if the U.S. education system raises minority high school graduation rates to the current level of white students, and if these new graduates go on to postsecondary education at similar rates, these young adults will not only have become better educated, but they will also be earning at higher levels. As a result, the states in which they live, as well as the nation as a whole, will be the economic beneficiaries. The potential earnings in selected states if minority groups were graduating from high school and going on to postsecondary education at the same rates as white students are listed in the chart below.

State	Additional Personal Income per Capita	Additional Total Personal Income
California	\$1,170	\$101.6 billion
Delaware	\$4,837	\$634 million
Florida	\$3,965	\$14.7 billion
Massachusetts	\$3,337	\$3.5 billion
Michigan	\$4,186	\$3.8 billion
Wyoming	\$3,467	\$106 million
Texas	\$2,412	\$46.5 billion

“The stunning potential economic benefit to the nation and the states of turning life around for underserved youth through improved schooling should be a wake-up call about the importance of reforming America’s high schools now,” the brief concludes, “because the nation truly needs the economic and social contributions these young people can make.”

The complete issue brief is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/demography.pdf>.

Census Bureau Releases New Earnings Estimates by Education Level

Individuals with a high school diploma earn about \$10,000 more annually than high school dropouts, according to the latest calculations from the U.S. Census Bureau. According to *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2005*, high school graduates earned an average of \$28,645 in 2004 while high school dropouts only earned \$19,169. The report, released on October 26, also finds that adults aged eighteen and older with a bachelor’s degree earned an average of \$51,554 and that advanced-degree holders made an average of \$78,093.

The report also finds that 85.2 percent of adults aged twenty-five or older have obtained their high school diploma. However, only 27.7 percent have obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher. When broken down by race, 85.8 percent of whites over twenty-five have a high school diploma, versus 81.1 percent of African Americans and only 58.5 percent of Hispanics. While 28.1 percent of whites have obtained their bachelor’s degree, only 17.6 percent of African Americans and 12 percent of Hispanics can say the same.

In total, the report contains fourteen tables of data on educational attainment and earnings and includes data broken down by age, sex, race and ethnic background, occupation, and industry, among others. The majority of the data is national, but some data for regions and states is also included.

The complete list of data tables is available at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/educ-attn.html>.



STATES AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS REEXAMINE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES

For too long, the true dimensions of our nation's graduation rate and dropout crisis have been obscured by unreliable national and state measures of high school completion rates based on differences in calculation methods and poor data quality. While researchers such as Chris Swanson of Editorial Projects in Education and Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research have developed graduation rate calculations that have pulled back the curtains on dropout rates at the national level, the quality of data on graduation and dropouts rates at the state level is such that many states cannot account for the status of their students as they progress through high school and beyond.

Fortunately, stakeholders at the local, state, and national levels have demonstrated leadership by taking important steps to build capacity to meet those goals. For example, the U.S. Department of Education has begun reporting its own graduation rate for each state, and all 50 of the nation's governors have signed a compact to implement a common, accurate graduation rate and to create better systems and methods of collecting, analyzing, and reporting graduation and dropout data (although a few have stepped back from that commitment in past months).

Earlier this year, the National Governors Association (NGA) issued a progress report on the implementation of the governors' compact. It said that thirteen states will report their graduation rate according to the compact formula in 2006, a number that will expand to thirty-nine by 2010. Of the remaining states, several are still determining when they will report the compact formula. Only North Dakota and South Dakota do not plan to use the compact rate.

In the meantime, some states and school systems have conducted studies or have reexamined their own dropout data in an effort to get a better handle on exactly how many students are dropping out of their schools.

New York City

A recent New York City Department of Education report finds that nearly 140,000 individuals aged sixteen to twenty-one have either dropped out of high school or are so far behind in their course work that they are unlikely to graduate. The study, which was supported with a \$2.6 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, also examines which students are likely to fall behind, at what point they fall behind, and which schools are better able to get students back on track.

The report finds that individuals who fall behind in their credits are considerably more likely to drop out. Of the Class of 2003's dropouts, 93 percent lagged in their credits at some point, compared to only 19 percent of individuals who graduated in 2003. The report also notes that many students fall behind after coming to high school with insufficient reading and math skills. However, 30 percent of freshmen with proficient or nearly proficient reading skills also fall behind in their work.

According to the study, there are 68,000 New York City students aged sixteen to twenty-one who have already dropped out of school, but there are 70,000 who are still enrolled even though they are behind in their credits. Effectively serving the students still in school, the bulk of whom are 16, 17 and 18, is critical to improving the city's graduation rate said **Michele Cahill, the senior counselor for education policy to Joel I. Klein, the schools chancellor.**

Kentucky

Kentucky underreported its dropout number for the 2004–05 school year by at least 1,979 students, according to an audit of Kentucky's dropout rate that was released by **Kentucky State Auditor Crit Luallen**. She reported that improper coding of students was one reason for the miscalculation. For example, the audit finds that students who leave school at the end of one year, but fail to return at the beginning of the next school year, were not coded as dropouts.

“Kentucky Dropout Rates Underreported Audit Includes Recommendations for Improvement”: http://www.auditor.ky.gov/Public/Audit_Reports/Archive/2006Dropoutreport-PR.htm.

Mississippi

Only about 61 percent of Mississippi's students graduate from high school on time, according to a new formula that combines federal and NGA guidelines. Previously, the state had reported that 85 percent of its students graduate in four years.

“Grad rate worsens with new estimates” is available at <http://www.clarionledger.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061023/NEWS/610230340/1002/NEWS01>.

Army Meets Recruitment Goal

Earlier this month, the U.S. Army announced that it had recruited 80,635 soldiers for fiscal year 2006, exceeding its recruiting goal for that year by 635 soldiers. This was the Army's first year of recruiting after it had decided to enlist recruits who score near the bottom of military aptitude tests. While approximately 2,600 soldiers were recruited under the new standards, the Army said that all had received high school diplomas.

“Tests don't tell you the answer to the most critical question for the Army, [which is] how you will do in combat?” said **Daniel Goure, vice president of the Lexington Institute**, a private research group. “The absolute key for the Army is a high school diploma.”

According to statistics from the Associated Press, 3.8 percent of first-time recruits scored between the sixteenth and thirtieth percentile on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, the aptitude tests that the Defense Department gives to all potential military personnel. In previous years, the Army only permitted 2 percent of its recruits to come from this range. Last year, the ceiling was increased to 4 percent.

Complete recruiting figures are available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/Releases/Release.aspx?ReleaseID=10057>.

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:

- *Writing Next*: New Alliance Report Trumpets Writing as an Important Component to Literacy Instruction and as a Predictor of Academic Success
- *Demography as Destiny*: Alliance Finds that Low Minority Graduation Rates and Rising Minority Populations Could Jeopardize the Nation's Economic Future
- States and School Districts Reexamine High School Graduation Rates



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