



# Straight A's™

Public Education Policy And Progress



## ***IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT: New Alliance Brief Finds Flaws in NCLB's Design and Implementation for the Nation's High Schools***

Five years ago, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) passed with bipartisan support in Congress because members from both political parties decided that the nation needed to close the achievement gaps that exist between students of different racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. They also agreed that schools should be held accountable for the success of all students. However, *In Need of Improvement: NCLB & High Schools*, a new issue brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education, finds flaws in NCLB's design and implementation for dealing with the unique challenges that exist in the nation's high schools.

“While well intentioned, the current NCLB simply does not address the dropout problem and ignores the fact that far too many students do not finish high school without adequate preparation for college or the modern workforce,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “It does not effectively reach high schools, and too many children are being left behind by ninth grade. With the law up for renewal this year, this is the time to build on the ideals of ‘no child left behind’ and to pass legislation that will lead the nation toward ‘every child a graduate.’ ”

Although many of NCLB's provisions apply to all public schools, including high schools, the brief maintains that the law was designed primarily with earlier grades in mind. In fact, as the brief notes, President Bush's original twenty-eight-page proposal for what became NCLB only mentioned the term “high school” twice. At best, the brief says, the law does not take into account either the nation's evolving needs for an increasingly better-educated populace or the considerable differences between elementary schools and secondary schools. At worst, it says, NCLB's provisions “often neglect” or “are even at odds with” the needs of America's secondary school students.

For example, when it comes to setting goals and measuring Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in America's high schools, NCLB relies on proficiency on state tests and on graduation rates, but according to the brief, there are several inherent flaws with both measurements.

NCLB allows each state to develop its own standards, to set its own definition of proficiency, and to create its own assessments. Given such flexibility, many states set their standards at low levels so that more students could reach the minimum standard rather than establishing world-class standards that would prepare students for college and the workforce.

## ***In Need of Improvement***

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The brief also identifies problems with the graduation rate accountability provisions in NCLB, which it says are threefold. First, many state graduation rate calculations do not account for large numbers of students who left school without a regular diploma. As a result, the graduation rates that states report are unreliable. Second, while NCLB sets 100 percent proficiency on state tests in reading and math as its ultimate goal, it does not set an ultimate graduation rate goal. Therefore, states are not required to set—and schools are not required to meet—meaningful progress benchmarks (annual measurable objectives) toward that graduation rate goal. And finally, only aggregate (not student subgroup) graduation rates are used in the determination of AYP. Consequently, the low graduation rates of poor and minority students, students with limited English proficiency, and students with disabilities are not factored into AYP determinations and are often hidden from the public eye.

According to the brief, even if the problems with the goals and measurements required by NCLB were addressed, low-performing high schools would still be left out and their students left behind. Why? Because under NCLB, only schools that actually receive Title I funds are subject to the law’s testing, reporting, and accountability provision. However, because states and districts are likely to direct additional resources toward meeting the needs of younger students in the hope of correcting problems early in students’ educational careers, the vast majority of resources provided by Title I of NCLB go to elementary school students—in contrast, only about 8 percent of Title I funds go to high school students. As a result, most secondary schools receive little support for improvement and are exempt from undertaking significant reforms.

Other problems with NCLB that the brief identifies are the absence of a federal effort to improve reading and comprehension in middle and high school. NCLB recognizes the importance of early literacy skills by including a systemic intervention in every state through the Reading First program, a \$1 billion-a-year literacy program targeted to students in grades K–3. However, it makes no similar provision to improve reading and comprehension in middle and high school grades—even though 71 percent of all students enter high school reading below grade level.

Additionally, the limited tools NCLB does provide to improve low-performing schools—such as supplemental education services and intradistrict public school choice—reflect neither research nor best practice and are not effective for high school reform. For example, the public school choice provision is ineffective because 75 percent of America’s school districts have only one high school; thus, high school students often have few, if any, successful schools to which they can transfer.

In its conclusion, the brief says that calls to merely extend testing requirements to high school are “shortsighted,” as are those that suggest simply reserving portions of current funding streams for high schools. Instead, it maintains that there must be a comprehensive appraisal of how NCLB’s accountability and improvement system currently applies to high schools; then, a systemic solution that reflects all that is known about improving high schools from research and best practice must be crafted.

The complete brief is available at [http://www.all4ed.org/publications/NCLB\\_HighSchools.pdf](http://www.all4ed.org/publications/NCLB_HighSchools.pdf).



## **NEA WELCOMES PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES TO ITS ANNUAL MEETING: Eight Candidates for the Nation's Highest Office Address Delegates**

The National Education Association (NEA) is the largest teachers union in the country. With 3.2 million members, the organization is a force to be reckoned with when it comes to education reform. NEA's clout was on display last week at its annual meeting and representative assembly, which attracted over 9,000 delegates and eight presidential candidates: **U.S. Senators Joe Biden (D-DE), Hillary Clinton (D-NY), Chris Dodd (D-CT), and Barack Obama (D-IL), former North Carolina Senator John Edwards (D), Governor Bill Richardson (D-NM), former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee (R), and U.S. Representative Dennis Kucinich (D-OH).**

On July 2, Dodd, Edwards, and Clinton addressed the delegates, and although all three voted for the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, they stressed that the law is in need of serious revision. "It's time that we get this law right," Dodd said, adding that NCLB needs higher funding levels, among other things. For their part, Edwards and Clinton focused on the testing aspect of the law, with Edwards saying that the tests "do not tell us what we need to know about our children" and Clinton asserting that the test is "becoming the curriculum when it should be the other way around." In addition to NCLB, the candidates addressed other education issues. Clinton used the opportunity to call for universal preschool for four-year-olds and smaller class size. Edwards talked about improving low-income students' access to college.

When he spoke on July 5, Obama called "No Child Left Behind" one of the "emptiest slogans in the history of politics," adding that Congress had "left the money behind." Obama also took on the controversial topic of merit pay, saying that not only should teachers' salaries be increased across the board, but also that performance-based merit pay ought to be considered in public schools—an idea that the NEA is very much against.

"If you're willing to teach in a high-need subject like math or science or special education, we'll pay you even more," Obama said. "If you're willing to take on more responsibilities like mentoring, we'll pay you more." He added that he wanted to find new ways to increase pay that are "developed with teachers, not imposed on them and not based on some arbitrary test score."

Admitting that he was "as out of place as Michael Moore at the NRA convention," Huckabee said that education is an issue that "must cut across party lines." He said that the presidential debates have focused heavily on national security, but "there is another issue of national security, and it is the education of our children." Huckabee also said that heavy emphasis on testing has led to a narrowing of school curriculums, which contributes to the national dropout crisis because students need access to subjects that excite them.

Biden called public education his "top domestic priority" and said that lawmakers could provide more money for education by ending the war in Iraq, which costs about \$100 billion a year, and by rolling back the Bush administration's tax cut for the wealthiest Americans, which costs about \$85 billion. He also said that the nation must attract 100,000 new teachers into its classrooms and provide them with the competitive salaries and respect needed to keep them there.

Complete coverage of the NEA's annual meeting is available at <http://www.nea.org/annualmeeting/index.html>.

## NCLB Reauthorization Continues to be a Top Priority for President Bush

On June 25, in a joint appearance with U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings and the 141 high school seniors who were selected as 2007 Presidential Scholars, President Bush called the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) “one of the top priorities of my administration.” President Bush identified more accountability for high schools, an expansion of the Advanced Placement program, and extra funding for underperforming schools as some of his priorities for NCLB reauthorization.

The Congressional committees responsible for producing the legislation to reauthorize NCLB want to see the law’s revision finalized this year. Education observers note that the House Education and Labor Committee is trying to vote on a draft rewrite of NCLB before the August recess, with the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee likely to consider its version of the rewrite sometime in the fall. Whether Congress will actually pass a reauthorization of the law before it adjourns at the end of the year is still up in the air.

At the Presidential Scholars event, President Bush explained that students who are selected for the program have demonstrated outstanding academic achievement, artistic excellence, leadership, citizenship, service, and contribution to school and community. The president drew a big laugh from the audience when he said that the program started in 1964, when he was a senior in high school. “I didn’t make it,” he deadpanned.

President Bush’s speech to the 2007 Presidential Scholars is available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/06/20070625-7.html>.

Secretary Spellings’s announcement of the 2007 Presidential Scholars is available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2007/05/05022007.html>.



## AMERICANS SPEAK: Seventh Annual Survey From ETS Finds Majority of the Public Supports NCLB Reauthorization

Parents, teachers, and school administrators strongly support the renewal, or reauthorization, of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), according to *Standards, Accountability, and Flexibility: Americans Speak on No Child Left Behind Reauthorization*, a survey released last month by ETS. While the survey finds that less than half (45 percent) of the public thinks that they know a great deal or fair amount about NCLB, it finds that only 16 percent of the public, 25 percent of teachers, and 22 percent of administrators believe Congress should not reauthorize the law. However, it adds that teachers and administrators are clear in calling for major changes in NCLB when Congress considers its renewal.

“The survey clearly shows that despite a lack of knowledge among the American public and strong misgivings of teachers and administrators, there is strong support for reauthorization of No Child Left Behind,” said **Kurt Landgraf, president and CEO of ETS**. “The lack of understanding among parents of school-age children and the general public initially led to slightly more negative than positive feelings toward NCLB, but once the law was explained, a majority then favored its continuation. This shows that NCLB supporters need to increase awareness among the public about the law’s provisions and benefits.”

The survey also finds that participants favor greater flexibility in assisting students and schools struggling to meet high standards and call for increased funding for schools failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress.

While this year's study is devoted entirely to NCLB, it also sheds some light on the public's perception that education is vital to the success of the nation. In fact, 59 percent of the public believes that America's global competitiveness and the strength of the economy will be negatively impacted within ten years if changes are not made to the education system. It also found that the public supports national standards, with nearly 59 percent saying that they would replace NCLB's state-based standards and testing with one set of national standards.

The survey, the seventh from ETS' annual Americans Speak survey, was conducted by bipartisan pollsters Peter Hart and David Winston. Previous surveys in the series have tracked educational issues facing America, including a limited number of questions on the public's impressions of NCLB since it first became law.

The complete results from the survey are available at <http://www.ets.org/americansspeak.html>.



### ***A SOLID INVESTMENT: New Alliance Publication Finds Strong Evidence to Justify a Major New Federal Effort to Support Adolescent Literacy***

In 1997, alarmed by low levels of reading achievement in America's schools, Congress funded a blue-ribbon National Reading Panel (NRP) and directed it to conduct an exhaustive review of more than thirty years of research into the teaching and learning of reading. The resulting report is now widely viewed as an exemplar of the sort of useful, trustworthy guidance that the education research community can and should provide to federal policymakers. Indeed, its recommendations laid the groundwork for the Reading First program, which has, to date, provided more than \$5 billion in funding to the states to support research-based reading instruction in the first few years of school.

It is important to note, however, that while Reading First focuses only on grades K–3, the NRP report was not limited to research on early literacy. Actually, it surveyed the research on reading instruction throughout grades K–12, and it can provide a solid foundation for the federal Striving Readers program—which supports literacy instruction in the middle and high school grades—just as it did for Reading First. Indeed, the findings of the NRP and research that has been released since the NRP's report was issued constitute a solid base of knowledge that justifies a major new federal investment in adolescent literacy, asserts *Federal Support for Adolescent Literacy: A Solid Investment*, a new issue brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education. The report notes that, over the past decade, significant findings related to instruction in grades 4–12 have been made, the knowledge base on adolescent literacy has expanded, and the research exists to provide a solid foundation for effective policymaking.

“There is a large body of research that can be brought to bear on adolescent literacy problems,” said **Michael Kamil, professor of education at Stanford University, and member of the National Reading Panel** who was one of several literacy experts quoted in the brief. “While we need to know more, we can help struggling and striving adolescent readers right now if we apply what we already know.”

According to the brief, when Reading First was launched five years ago, many policymakers believed that if students could master the basics of literacy in the first few years of school, that

## ***A Solid Investment***

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would be sufficient to carry them successfully through the middle and high school years. Increasingly, though, research has made it clear that students need ongoing support in order to handle the more difficult kinds of reading and writing they must do in the upper grades. This research is underscored by results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading, which find that fewer than a third of America's adolescents meet grade-level expectations for reading; among low-income students, the number is closer to one in seven.

After reviewing some of the relevant recent research studies and policy reports on literacy, the brief outlines several recommendations for policy change. They include:

- Encourage schools, districts, and states to articulate clear, comprehensive, actionable plans for improving literacy instruction;
- Invest in tools that help schools identify struggling readers and appropriately adjust instruction in grades 4–12;
- Invest in ongoing professional development programs designed to help all middle and high school teachers provide effective reading and writing instruction in their subject areas;
- Support and invest in accountability systems that give teachers strong incentives to provide effective reading and writing instruction;
- Invest in ongoing research on and evaluation of strategies to improve adolescent literacy.

The brief acknowledges that many efforts are underway across the country to translate the recent reports and recommendations into real improvements in reading and writing instruction, including a number of disparate, small-scale reforms in schools, districts, and teacher education programs, as well as larger, statewide efforts such as Just Read, Florida! and the Alabama Reading Initiative. However, the brief also notes that the country has not pursued these strategies in any sort of concerted, systemic way.

“If widely implemented, [these strategies] would help millions of students improve their literacy skills, greatly increasing their chances to succeed in their middle and high school classes, earn a diploma, and continue on to college or job training programs,” the brief reads.

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



### **GRADUATION PROMISE ACT INTRODUCED IN HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES: New Legislation Would Provide \$2.5 Billion for Lowest-Performing High Schools**

On June 28, **Congressman Rubén Hinojosa (D-TX)** introduced new legislation that would make \$2.5 billion in federal funds available for use in transforming the nation's lowest-performing high schools into effective centers of teaching and learning. **Representatives Joe Baca (D-CA), Xavier Becerra (D-CA), Elijah Cummings (D-MD), Danny Davis (D-IL), Chaka Fattah (D-PA), Charles Gonzalez (D-TX), Luis Gutierrez (D-IL), Barbara Lee (D-CA), John Lewis (D-GA), Grace Napolitano (D-CA), Solomon Ortiz (D-TX), Silvestre Reyes (D-TX), Ciro Rodriguez (D-TX), Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA), John Salazar (D-**

**CO), Linda Sánchez (D-CA), Bobby Scott (D-VA), José Serrano (D-NY), Hilda Solis (D-CA), and Nydia Velázquez (D-NY)** joined him as original cosponsors.

Called the Graduation Promise Act (GPA), the bill would leverage statewide systems of high school improvement, support the development of effective school models for struggling students and dropouts, and reform state policies to remove barriers to high school reform.

The largest component of the GPA is a High School Improvement and Dropout Reduction Fund that would target the nation’s lowest-performing high schools—those with graduation rates of less than 60 percent. Nationwide, there are over 2,000 of these “dropout factories,” and they account for nearly half of the nation’s dropouts.

The bill would create a \$60 million grant program for the development, implementation, and replication of highly effective secondary school models for struggling students and dropouts. These models would serve a variety of struggling students, including those who are significantly older than others in the same grade and/or who lack the credits needed to progress toward an on-time graduation; late-entrant English language learners; and those who have already dropped out of school.

The third component of the bill is a \$40 million grant program that would encourage states to implement policy changes necessary to increase student achievement and graduation rates in every high school. Some changes could include additional high school options, such as small schools and early college high schools.

“The GPA meets a critical need at a critical time,” says Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia. “The nation’s economic future depends of the success of today’s high school students. All of our schools must receive the support they need to educate their students to the highest level possible. Congress is urged to pass this important legislation to make sure every student graduates from high school prepared to succeed in the twenty-first century.”

Similar legislation was introduced in the Senate on April 23 by **Senators Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), Richard Burr (R-NC), and Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA)**.

More information on the GPA, as well as other high school legislation currently pending before Congress, is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/legislative/index.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 six million at-risk middle and high school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.



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