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Public Education Policy And Progress



## **HOUSE COMMITTEE HOLDS HEARING ON NCLB REAUTHORIZATION: Alliance President Offers Testimony on NCLB and High Schools**

Continuing its work on the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the House Education and Labor Committee held a marathon hearing on September 10 that lasted over six hours and featured over forty witnesses, including **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. The hearing allowed witnesses the opportunity to comment on the Miller/McKeon staff discussion draft for the reauthorization of NCLB, which was released earlier in the month. (More information on the discussion draft is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/StraightAs/Volume7No17.html#NCLB>.)

“We didn’t get it all right when we enacted No Child Left Behind,” **Education and Labor Committee Chairman George Miller (D-CA)** acknowledged in his opening statement. “In increasing numbers and with increasing urgency, the American people are telling us that the No Child Left Behind Act is not fair, not flexible, and not adequately funded.”

Although Miller added that the accountability goals and standards of the current law are “not negotiable,” he outlined several priorities that he hoped the reauthorization of NCLB would address. Specifically, he mentioned a “smarter system of accountability” that would judge schools on multiple measures, rather than a “single test on a given day,” and growth models that would credit schools for gains in student achievement. Miller also said that the new accountability system should encourage states to set standards that would ensure that high school graduates are ready for college and the workplace.

In his testimony, Wise admitted that while he “seriously considered suing to enjoin the law” when he was governor, he has learned that it would have been a mistake to resist a law that “despite all its flaws, was intended to put a spotlight on the startling achievement gaps and to provide all children, including poor and minority children, with access to a high-quality education.”

Noting that NCLB in its current form “doesn’t do much to address what is a significant crisis in this country—the millions of students who are leaving our high schools, with or without a diploma, unprepared for their future”—Wise said he was pleased that the draft plan for revising NCLB takes a “huge step forward for high school reform at the federal level.”

Specifically, Wise praised the Committee for making college and work readiness the goal to which standards and assessments should be aligned. He also thanked the committee for including a new Graduation Promise Fund, which would help turn around the lowest-performing high schools, and asked the committee to include the full authorization of \$2.5 billion for the program.

## House Committee Holds Hearing on NCLB Reauthorization (Continued from p. 1)

Wise expressed support for the creation of a clear definition of a common graduation rate and for meaningful increases in those graduation rates. He also thanked the committee for including an emphasis on the need to use data to inform decisionmaking and the discussion draft's support for building and using statewide longitudinal data systems.

Wise also made several recommendations on how the NCLB discussion draft could be improved to better serve high schools and their students. For example, he asked the Committee to strengthen the process for improving schools to reflect what is known about successful high school turnaround and suggested that funds set aside for supplemental education services at the high school level should be used for effective dropout prevention and recovery programs. He also called for stronger incentives for states that choose to work together to establish and adopt common standards and high-quality assessments aligned to twenty-first-century skills and knowledge.

"This draft is a promising first step toward a reauthorization that has the opportunity to leverage powerful and necessary change in our nation's high schools," Wise said. "I look forward to working with the Committee to ensure that this reauthorization helps to move us all from 'no child left behind' to 'every child a graduate.'"

Video of the entire hearing, print copies of all witness testimony, and Chairman Miller's opening statement are available at <http://edlabor.house.gov/hearings/fc091007.shtml>.

### **Bush Instructs Cabinet Secretaries to Reject Proposed Funding**

In the latest battle between President Bush and Congress over Fiscal Year (FY) 2008 spending, the White House has instructed "nearly a dozen" Cabinet secretaries to send letters to Capitol Hill "rejecting Democrats' proposed new funds for their agencies," according to a September 18 article in the *Washington Post*. The dispute centers on \$22 billion in spending Democrats added to the president's budget request for FY 2008.

Calls to the U.S. Department of Education asking for comment on the article went unreturned, but the *Post* printed part of the letter that **Michael O. Leavitt, secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services** sent to **House Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey (D-WI)**. "I am confident the [administration] amount set for the Department of Health and Human Services will enable us to successfully accomplish our mission," Leavitt wrote. "As public servants, we owe it to American taxpayers to complete our work responsibly."

As passed by the House of Representatives on July 19, the FY 2008 Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education appropriations bill would provide \$151.7 billion in discretionary spending, \$10.8 billion more than the president proposed in his budget. For education, the bill would provide about \$6 billion more than President Bush's budget proposal.

Democrats have argued that the extra spending included in this year's appropriations bills would restore only a fraction of the Bush-era budget cuts to domestic programs and boost some programs that have been frozen for several years. "Last year, the Republican-dominated Congress was \$55 billion over what the president wanted," said **Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV)**. "He signed off on that. There were no lectures given about increasing taxes or that it was the people's money, not the government's money, not a single lecture given about that. Now, we're \$21 billion over what the president wants and we get all these lectures all the time, 'This isn't your money. It's the taxpayers' money,' even though all we're trying to do is restore what he's taken from this place."

"Bush Enlists Cabinet Officials In Fight Against New Spending" is available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/17/AR2007091701569.html>.



## **“HIGH SCHOOL TEACHING FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY”: New Alliance Brief Examines How Teachers Can Better Prepare Students for College**

High school teaching must focus on college-ready skills if students are to be truly prepared for the challenges of the twenty-first century, according to a new brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education. The brief, “High School Teaching for the Twenty-first Century: Preparing Students for College,” which was made possible by a generous grant from MetLife Foundation, suggests that meaningful high school reform hinges on teaching that is cognizant of and aligned to the expectations of colleges and employers. Currently, however, high school standards, assessments, and course requirements that teachers strive to meet are not aligned to college, evidenced by high college remediation rates and low college completion rates.

“Too many of our students are proudly graduating from high school only to find themselves unprepared to succeed in college or the workplace,” said Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia. “High school can no longer be viewed as the last leg of an academic journey, but rather as the gateway to developing sophisticated thinking skills for success in the twenty-first century.”

Citing research from ACT, the brief points out that high school teachers often value and teach different things than college instructors expect, due in part to poorly aligned standards and curricula. Community college and university professors expect students to know fewer but more targeted topics and to have mastered fundamental skills. High school teachers, on the other hand, rate the need to teach far more content and skills as important, and they focus students on topics that professors do not deem as critical.

But which skills and knowledge do students need to be college ready? Answering this question is not the purpose of the brief, which is focused on what individual teachers must do in the classroom in order to ensure that their students graduate prepared for college. However, the paper does point to research by ACT, Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute, and David Conley of the University of Oregon that can help policymakers and educators develop their own reasonable expectations of what it means to be college ready.

The brief notes that, first, high school teachers must set high expectations for their students. It points out that this is particularly critical for teachers working with students of color, as research shows that, unless they have received strong preparation for teaching, high school teachers in high-minority schools tend to have lower expectations for students going on to college. Teachers also need to ensure that the classroom assignments they give set college-ready expectations. According to the brief, teachers in higher-achieving high schools were much more likely to ask students to engage in college preparatory activities such as reading books, reading every day, completing reading-heavy assignments, and participating in classroom discussion.

Teachers should also deliver rigorous college preparatory content to their students. To do that, teachers need to know their content at a college level and update that knowledge regularly. They also need to teach students thinking skills essential to each content area. For example, students in history class should not just memorize facts (like the causes of the Civil War); instead, they

## **“High School Teaching for the Twenty-First Century”**

(Continued from p. 3)

should learn that history is about interpretation of events and how to engage in that interpretation critically and responsibly.

According to the brief, teachers should first develop content knowledge and the capacity to teach disciplinary thinking skills while in their teacher preparation program. However, ongoing professional development in the content area is also needed. As the brief points out, there are numerous studies and organizations that have developed college-ready content standards that can inform high school teachers once they are in the classroom, including the American Diploma Project, the Standards for Success Project, and the College Board.

Another huge component of adequately preparing students for college or work is ensuring that they have the reading and writing skills that will allow them to take on college assignments. Currently, however, most students enter high school struggling to master the content of each discipline because they have trouble understanding their textbooks or communicating what they have learned. In fact, 70 percent of eighth graders and 65 percent of twelfth graders do not read at proficient levels. Fortunately, significant efforts are underway to improve literacy among adolescents, including major reports on classroom- and school-level strategies, research-based recommendations on the topic for federal, state, and local policymakers, and efforts by states (such as Florida and Alabama) to train middle and high school teachers to support the literacy development of students in all subject areas.

In addition to what individual teachers need to do inside the classroom, the brief also focuses on what conditions and supports around teaching need to change in order to set teachers up to succeed in preparing students for college. For example, it points out that teachers will find their ability to impact college readiness stymied if conditions like out-of-field teaching or the lack of college-ready assessments persist. Another huge problem is simply keeping teachers in the profession. To combat teacher attrition, the brief calls for comprehensive induction support in their early years to keep them in the profession and to improve their skills.

The brief also finds that, rather than one test score at the end of the year, high school teachers need a range of assessments that measure and inform their students' preparation for college. But teachers must be willing and trained to use those assessments; otherwise, data will remain in a report instead of informing classroom practice. A growing number of states are beginning to embed college-ready assessments into their statewide assessment systems.

In its conclusion, the brief acknowledges that setting the high goal of college readiness will require nothing less than an intensive, sustained effort to reform high school teaching. But what also is crucial is to systematically increase the rigor of instruction so that high school teaching is aligned with college expectations.

The brief adds that policymakers must recognize the critical role teachers play in preparing students for college and must ensure that teachers get the assistance and resources they need. “Teachers, after all, are the ones who make the greatest impact on students’ learning for college by setting high expectations, teaching rigorous content and college preparatory skills, and

motivating more students to set their sights on college,” it reads. “But they also deserve, and must receive, the supports and conditions necessary for success—their own and that of their students headed to college.”

The complete brief is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/HSTeach21st.pdf>.

### Video from Release Event Now Available

On September 12, the Alliance held a release event for “High School Teaching for the Twenty-first Century: Preparing Students for College.” **Jeremy Ayers, policy and advocacy associate at the Alliance for Excellent Education**, authored the brief and provided comments at the release event.

The event also included a thoughtful discussion by a panel of national experts on teacher quality, including **Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond, professor of education at Stanford University; Ms. Kim McClung, English teacher at Kent-Meridian High School in Washington state; Dr. Cyndie Schmeiser, president of the education division of ACT; and Dr. Doug Wood, executive director of the National Academy for Excellent Teaching at Teachers College. Dr. Jane West, vice president of government relations at the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education**, moderated the panel.

Audio and video from the release event are available at <http://www.all4ed.org/events/HSTeach21st/agenda.html>.



### **ACHIEVEMENT TRAP: New Report Examines How America is Failing High-Achieving Students from Low-Income Families**

The nation’s schools are failing not just low-achieving, poor students, but their high-achieving peers as well, according to a new report from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and Civic Enterprises. *Achievement Trap: How America is Failing 3.4 Million High-Achieving Students from Lower-Income Families* calls for continuing the national goal of improving basic skills and ensuring minimal proficiency in reading and math among low-income students but says that there also must be a more concerted effort to promote high achievement within the same population.

“No Child Left Behind’s successes in demanding greater accountability for reversing poor achievement among low-income students are laudable and should be continued,” said **Joshua S. Wyner, executive vice president of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation**. “But we are missing an important opportunity to promote high achievement for all students, no matter what their income and background. The needs of high-potential and high-achieving students should not be pitted against the educational needs of underachievers.”

According to the report, about 3.4 million students in grades K–12 come from families with incomes below the national median but still manage to score in the top quartile academically. Of these students, more than one million qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. These high-achieving, lower-income students, who the report calls “young strivers,” come from families in poverty and from working-class families and are demographically and geographically very similar to the overall population of students.

## **New Report Examines How America is Failing High-Achieving Students from Low-Income Families** (Continued from p. 5)

“The presence of these 3.4 million students provides hope to others caught in similar circumstances,” the report reads. “Even though they possess fewer resources and often suffer from low expectations in the classroom, many lower-income students still find ways to excel, giving us reason to believe that students can perform at very high levels despite economic disadvantages.”

Of the first-grade students who score at the highest quartile, only 28 percent come from families in America’s lower economic half, compared to the 72 percent that come from the top economic half. “If childhood achievement levels were independent of economic background, we would expect that half of the top academic achievers would come from each half of the economic scale,” the report reads. Instead, “lower-income children have inadequate access to high-quality preschool programs that can significantly increase academic ability, cognitive development, social adjustment, and professional achievement.”

According to the report, this “disparity at the starting line” continues throughout elementary and secondary school. It finds that young strivers have more difficulty maintaining their lofty academic standing than high-achieving students from more affluent families. For example, the report finds that 44 percent of lower-income students fall out of the top achievement quartile in reading between first and fifth grades, compared to only 31 percent of students from higher-income families.

Young strivers who maintain their status through fifth grade face another challenge as they enter high school. More than 25 percent of high-achieving students from lower-income families fall from the top quartile of achievement between the start of ninth grade and the end of high school. In a bit of good news, while high-achieving lower-income students’ achievement levels may fall, they are unlikely to drop out of high school altogether. In fact, the report finds that 93 percent of students who were high-achieving and lower-income in eighth grade graduate from high school on time.

Lower-income students who finish high school in the top quartile of achievement go to college at rates similar to their high-achieving peers from more affluent families, according to *Achievement Trap*. However, high-achieving students from lower-income families are much less likely to graduate from college (59 percent) than their high-achieving peers from wealthier families (77 percent).

Several recommendations are offered to ensure that more young strivers reach their potential. For example, the report suggests a greater focus on early childhood in order to understand why comparatively few lower-income students achieve at high levels upon entering elementary school and what can be done to close the achievement gap in first grade. It also recommends that local school districts, states, and the federal government collect better data on high-achieving lower-income students and the programs that contribute to their success, and use this information to identify and replicate practices that sustain and improve high levels of performance.

The nation's failure to help the nation's young strivers reach their potential has significant implications for the social mobility of America's lower-income families and the strength of the nation's economy and society as a whole. "By reversing the downward trajectory of their educational achievement, we will not only improve the lives of lower-income high-achievers, but also strengthen our nation by unleashing the potential of literally millions of young people who could be making great contributions to our communities and country," the report states.

The complete report is available at <http://civicenterprises.net/pdfs/jkc.pdf>.

### **Education on *Parade*: Bill Gates Shares Views on National Standards, U.S. High Schools in National Magazine**

The September 23 issue of *Parade* magazine featured **Microsoft chairman and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation cochair Bill Gates**, with the headline "Can Bill Gates Fix Our Failing Schools?" In the article, Gates—who two years ago stood before the nation's governors and asserted that today's high schools are "obsolete" and who declared that he was "appalled" by the state of the U.S. education system—said that education was especially important to the foundation that he and his wife Melinda have created.

Gates considers standardized testing a valuable and necessary component of education. "Testing is the only objective measurement of our students," he said, adding, "It's incredible that we have no national standard." The alarming number of students who graduate from high school unprepared for the twenty-first-century workplace is also a point of concern for Gates, who notes that more than a third of high school graduates "have no employable skills."

Gates views a back-to-basics approach as the way to fix our nation's schools, with a special emphasis on phonics in reading instruction. Gates also believes in rewarding quality teachers and in ending the disparities between urban and suburban schools. He cites the high dropout rate of black males as a serious problem. He also points out that 20 percent of Americans who take honors classes and go on to college will get an education "as good as or better than anywhere else in the world. It's the other 80 percent where the U.S. is weak."

The full article is available at [http://www.parade.com/articles/editions/2007/edition\\_09-23-2007/Intelligence\\_Report](http://www.parade.com/articles/editions/2007/edition_09-23-2007/Intelligence_Report).

### **NAEP Reading and Math Results Released on September 25**

The 2007 national and state results in reading and math from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card, was released on September 25. The event featured **Darvin M. Winick, chair of the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB)**, **Mark S. Schneider, commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics**, and comments from other NAGB members.

The complete results are online at <http://nationsreportcard.gov/>. Complete coverage of the event will be included in the October 8 issue of *Straight A's*.

***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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In this issue:

- House Committee Holds Hearing on NCLB Reauthorization: Alliance President Offers Testimony on NCLB and High Schools
- “High School Teaching for the Twenty-First Century”: New Alliance Brief Examines How Teachers Can Better Prepare Students for College
- Achievement Trap: New Report Examines How America is Failing High-Achieving Students from Low-Income Families



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