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EXCELLENT EDUCATION

# StraightA's™

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **SENATORS INTRODUCE GRADUATION PROMISE ACT: New Legislation Would Target Lowest-Performing High Schools**

On April 23, **U.S. Senators Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), Richard Burr (R-NC), and Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA)** introduced new legislation that would transform the nation's lowest-performing high schools into effective centers of teaching and learning. Called the Graduation Promise Act (GPA), the legislation would set aside \$2.5 billion each year for the purpose of reforming the nation's high schools.

The largest component of the legislation is a \$2.4 billion High School Improvement and Dropout Reduction Fund that focuses on the nation's approximately 2,000 "dropout factories."<sup>1</sup> According to researchers Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters from Johns Hopkins University, dropout factories are high schools where 60 percent (or fewer) of freshmen will have become seniors three years after finishing their ninth-grade year; these schools account for nearly half of the nation's dropouts. In addition, almost half of the nation's African-American students and nearly 40 percent of Latino students attend these schools, compared to only 11 percent of white students.

"We cannot afford to let the estimated 2,000 failing high schools in our country continue to push students off the path to prosperity," Bingaman said. "Collectively, these schools serve approximately 2.4 million students. We must ensure the continued prosperity of our country by promising [all] high school students a chance to gain the skills and knowledge necessary to pursue their dreams and succeed. The Graduation Promise Act will help make that possible."

States would use money from the High School Improvement and Dropout Reduction Fund to create or expand comprehensive state accountability and improvement systems that identify high schools with low graduation rates and low student achievement. Once identified, these schools would receive resources to implement evidence-based school improvement activities that have been proven to improve student achievement and to increase high school graduation rates.

As part of this system, states would develop performance indicators and set a minimum amount of improvement that they would expect schools to make on these indicators. Districts would use the school performance indicators that their state develops to categorize high schools that fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress for two consecutive years into one of three improvement categories: schools needing targeted assistance, schools needing whole school reform, or schools needing replacement.

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<sup>1</sup> More information on Balfanz and Legters's research is available at <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/pubs/grad.htm>.

## Senators Introduce Graduation Promise Act (Continued from p. 1)

In addition, 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 students 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 students who have already dropped out of school, among others.

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 Graduation Promise Act will make great strides in helping high school students achieve their fullest potential by bringing our schools into the twenty-first century,” Kennedy said. “The bill will help local schools, states, and the federal government to work together to modernize the practices and models that are being used in our schools to ensure the success of all our students.”

The GPA already has the formal, public support of over thirty national education organizations, including the Alliance for Excellent Education. “With one-third of our high school students not graduating, and another third graduating without the knowledge and skills to succeed in college or the workforce, our high schools are floundering and in desperate need of reform,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and a former governor of West Virginia**. “The nation’s high dropout rates are a cry for federal action. The Graduation Promise Act identifies the needs of our struggling high schools and students, provides strategies for improvement, and assigns appropriate funding for implementation.”

Read Senator Bingaman’s press release on the Graduation Promise Act at <http://bingaman.senate.gov/news/record.cfm?id=272917>.

*Use the Alliance’s promoting power database to identify dropout factories (high schools with a promoting power of 60 percent or less) in your state at <http://www.all4ed.org/highschooldata/>.*



### GRADUATION PROMISE ACT JOINS OTHER HIGH SCHOOL LEGISLATION CURRENTLY PENDING BEFORE CONGRESS

When the Graduation Promise Act was introduced last week, it became the latest in a number of high school reform bills pending in Congress. A quick search of THOMAS, the Library of Congress’s website of federal legislation, reveals over one hundred bills with “high school” somewhere in their texts. However, removing the forty-five or so resolutions that honor everyone and everything from Thomas Jefferson High School in Brooklyn, New York (for winning the 2006–2007 PSAL New York City A-League Girls Basketball championship) to Ernest Gallo, “a pioneer in the field of winemaking” (who also graduated from Modesto High School in 1927) leaves a select number of bills that are focused on comprehensive high school reform.

One such piece of legislation, the Pathways for All Students to Succeed Act (PASS Act), was introduced by **Senator Patty Murray (D-WA)** on February 15. First introduced in 2003 but

gaining more attention in the current political environment, the PASS Act takes a three-pronged approach to raising student achievement in high schools. First, it would provide resources that allow schools to hire literacy and math coaches, who would then work with teachers to identify students who struggle to perform at grade level. Second, the bill would allow states to hire additional academic counselors in their poorest high schools. Working with parents and students, these academic counselors would create six-year graduation plans that list the courses and support services that a student needs to graduate. The PASS Act also would provide low-performing high schools with grants that would enable them to implement school reform models that have been proven to raise student achievement. Finally, the bill would provide grants to schools to set up the data systems necessary to accurately calculate graduation rates.

“If we’re going to make sure all students can graduate prepared for college and careers, we need to start academic planning in middle school and provide more help for math and literacy through high school. That’s exactly what the PASS Act does,” Murray said after the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee hearing on “Modernizing Middle and High Schools for the 21st Century.” (See page 4 for additional information about this hearing.)

Another bill that would work to improve high school graduation rates and student preparation for college and work is the Graduate for a Better Future Act, which was introduced by Senator Richard Burr on March 6. This legislation specifically targets dropout factories and would help high schools identify at-risk students and give them the support they need to stay in school. Specifically, students who are frequently absent or who are struggling to perform at grade level in math, reading, or science would be targeted for accelerated catch-up programs. The bill would also create a comprehensive college guidance program that would make sure that students and their parents are regularly notified about the student’s progress, informing them about college entrance requirements and providing guidance about the college admissions process, including how to apply for scholarships and financial aid.

The Graduation for All Act was introduced March 21 by **Representative Ruben Hinojosa (D-TX)**. Like the PASS Act, it was also originally offered in 2003. This legislative proposal would authorize \$1 billion in federal funding for schools to increase literacy rates and to implement individual graduation plans for students most at risk of dropping out of high school, targeting funding to schools with the lowest graduation rates and allowing them to hire one literacy coach for every 600 students. Literacy coaches would then train teachers across the curriculum to incorporate research-based literacy instruction into their teaching and identify students who struggle to read at grade level.

More detailed information on these and other bills, including the Striving Readers Act, which was covered in the April 2 issue of *Straight A’s*, is available in a new section on the Alliance’s website. With apologies to Thomas Jefferson High School in Brooklyn, New York, the website will not track every bill or resolution that mentions high schools, but it will include descriptions of legislation that could directly improve the achievement of America’s secondary school students, including legislation that focuses on improving teacher recruitment and retention, math and science education, and adolescent literacy, among other elements of reform. The section will feature the Alliance’s analysis of select bills, lists of cosponsors, and other supporting materials. It can be found at <http://www.all4ed.org/legislative/index.html>.



## **GENTLEMEN (AND LADIES), START YOUR HEARINGS: Congress Considers How Upcoming NCLB Rewrite Should Address High School Reform**

With the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) up for renewal this year and dismal high school graduation rates in headlines throughout the United States, Congress has started to consider ways that it can use the reauthorization of NCLB to improve student outcomes in high school. Last week, both the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives held hearings on NCLB and high schools; Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise appeared as a witness at both.

On April 24, the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee heard testimony on “NCLB Reauthorization: Modernizing Middle and High Schools for the 21st Century.” Setting the tone for the hearing, HELP Committee Chairman Edward M. Kennedy used his opening statement to declare, “It’s clear that secondary school students need as much attention and help in [essential courses such as reading and math] as students in lower grades do.” As evidence, he pointed to results from the National Assessment in Educational Progress (NAEP) that show that only 30 percent of eighth-grade students performed at grade level or better in math and reading and that only 35 percent of twelfth graders were at grade level in reading.

Kennedy also stressed that more needs to be done to aid students in the transition from middle school to high school and called for better alignment of standards and curricula between middle and high schools. He suggested that students need the opportunity to pursue college-level work as soon as possible and named dual enrollment, early college high schools, International Baccalaureate, and Advanced Placement as examples of programs that can “make a difference in students’ skill levels and future opportunities.”

He added that more resources are needed at the middle and high school levels to raise student achievement and to ensure that every student can graduate from high school.

“Federal investment at the middle and high school level is not sufficient. The main source of federal funds is through the Title I program,” Kennedy said. “Yet, only 8 percent of students who benefit from these funds are in high school. Ninety percent of high schools with very low graduation rates have many low-income students. But only a quarter of these schools receive Title I funds.”

In his opening statement, **Senator Mike Enzi (R-WY), the ranking member on the HELP Committee**, stressed the tremendous loss that dropouts inflict on the nation’s economy. “If the high school students who had dropped out of the Class of 2006 had graduated instead, the nation’s economy would have benefited from an additional \$309 billion in income they would have earned over their lifetimes,” he said. “It’s an incredible statistic. . . . We simply cannot afford to lose those resources. We must deal with the situation head on—we cannot allow students to ‘waste’ their senior year, and graduate unprepared to enter postsecondary education and a workforce focused on skills and knowledge.”

In his testimony, Alliance President Bob Wise echoed Senator Kennedy's comments about a general lack of funding for middle and high schools. He also suggested ways the Senate could use the rewrite of NCLB to address some of the problems in the nation's secondary schools.

"NCLB at its core is about accountability for improving student achievement," Wise said. "However, there is not true accountability at the high school level—the law looks at test scores but not at if students actually graduate. It's as if we are clocking runners in a race every mile but then do not pay attention to whether they cross the finish line."

Among the solutions Wise recommended were a new, meaningful high school accountability system that is tied closely to school improvement. However, he quickly added that a new accountability system alone would not suffice and said that a rewrite of NCLB must include other measures that will inform teaching, support students, and provide the interventions that will ultimately improve student achievement.

Wise also said that a revised NCLB should establish a process for developing shared education standards that are aligned with expectations of postsecondary education and the workforce. He added that the federal government should provide states with incentives and supports for adopting these standards and aligning them with their curricula and graduation requirements. Wise also stressed the importance of longitudinal data systems and individual student identifiers to provide information on how students are performing.

**Robert Balfanz, director of the Talent Development Middle School**, explained in his testimony how his work and the work of his colleagues at the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins has allowed them to identify the 2,000 high schools in the country that account for about half of the nation's dropouts. Balfanz also explained that, based on his work with Talent Development, he knows that students in these schools have the ability to learn, but they need "much more intensive and effective instruction and adult support" than these schools typically provide.

Other witnesses at the hearing included **Tony Habit, president of the New Schools Project in Raleigh, NC; Edna Varner, a senior program consultant for Hamilton County Public Education Foundation and Public Schools in Chattanooga, TN; and John Podesta, president and CEO of the Center for American Progress.**

### **House Education and Labor Committee Examines Dropouts and School Safety**

On April 23, the House Committee on Education and Labor held a hearing titled "NCLB: Preventing Dropouts and Enhancing School Safety." In his opening statement, **House Education and Labor Committee Chairman George Miller (D-CA)** asked witnesses how Congress could approach the upcoming rewrite of the No Child Left Behind Act to promote engaging, safe learning environments that help students most at risk for dropping out. He added that the committee is reviewing elements of successful dropout prevention programs and is beginning to understand the factors that might cause a student to drop out.

## **Congress Considers How Upcoming NCLB Rewrite Can Address High School Reform**

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“Beyond just socioeconomic factors, experts have identified early indicators that help predict whether a student is likely to drop out of high school,” he said. “Research in four school districts shows that we can identify over half of future dropouts as early as the sixth grade by looking at a small number of telling indicators—attendance, discipline, and trouble mastering basic reading and math skills.”

In his testimony, Bob Wise explained that students need to feel safe and engaged in their schools to succeed in high school or at any level of education. “The Alliance for Excellent Education has developed a list of the ten elements of a successful high school for students and their families,” Wise said. “Those elements are challenging classes, personal attention for all students, extra help for those who need it, skilled teachers, strong leaders, necessary resources, user-friendly information for families and the community, bringing the real world into the classroom, family and community involvement, and a safe learning environment.”

Other witnesses at the hearing included **Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, executive director at the Intercultural Development Research Association in San Antonio, TX; Kenneth S. Trump, president of the National School Safety and Security Services in Cleveland, OH; Kenneth Smith, president of Jobs for America’s Graduates; and Jane P. Norwood, vice-chair of the North Carolina State Board of Education.**

Witness testimony from the Senate hearing, as well as an archived webcast, is available at [http://help.senate.gov/Hearings/2007\\_04\\_24/2007\\_04\\_24.html](http://help.senate.gov/Hearings/2007_04_24/2007_04_24.html).

An archived webcast of the House hearing and complete witness testimony are available at <http://edlabor.house.gov/hearings/fc042307.shtml>.

### **Hunt Institute Hosts Nation’s Governors in Executive Session on Education Challenges**

On April 11–13, the James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy held its 2007 Governors Education Symposium. The symposium allowed the nation’s governors the opportunity to hear from nationally recognized education experts and to examine the critical challenges that face the nation’s schools. The event was cohosted by **Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano (D), current chair of the National Governors Association, Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty (R), and former North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt, Jr.** As a former governor of West Virginia, Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise also attended the event.

The symposium focused on strategies for increasing college readiness, providing extra learning opportunities for students, and improving teacher compensation and performance. Specifically, governors discussed how state standards could be narrowed to focus on a few key topics and could become better aligned with postsecondary expectations. In order to determine how well students were prepared for college, longitudinal data systems were recommended to chart student achievement past high school and into college. Other recommendations that arose from the symposium were the need to increase quality learning opportunities and to reward high-performing teachers.

The Hunt Institute will issue a summary report on the symposium in the coming months. More information is available at <http://www.hunt-institute.org/HIELPEvents/Events/ShowEvent.aspx?RecordID=13>.



## **ED IN '08: Billionaire Philanthropists Gates and Broad Announce \$60 Million Campaign to Make Education a Key Issue in 2008 Presidential Election**

With all of the activity in Congress surrounding the rewrite of No Child Left Behind and improving the nation's secondary schools, it's only natural for education advocates to start thinking about how the next president of the United States will tackle the subject. Last week, the push for Ed in '08 began in earnest when the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation joined forces to create Strong American Schools, a \$60 million campaign to make education a key issue in the 2008 presidential race. Although the project will not endorse candidates, it will feature television and radio advertising and an Internet drive that will create a national network of volunteers.

"Each year more than one million students drop out of high school. That's one child every 29 seconds," said **Bill Gates, cochair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**. "We all must demand that candidates and our leaders share their opinions and policies on how our country will offer all young people Strong American Schools."

As part of the campaign, Strong American Schools will encourage presidential candidates to consider and debate, in particular, three "common-sense priorities" that can improve education in America: strong American education standards that are aligned with college and work expectations, effective teachers in every classroom, and more time and support for in-depth learning and greater personal attention for successful and struggling students alike.

"The American dream is slipping away, and unless our leaders dramatically improve our public schools, our standard of living, our economy and our very democracy will be threatened," said **Eli Broad, founder of the Eli and Edythe L. Broad Foundation**. "Our country's education system is no longer the best in the world. We need every American to demand better schools and specific policy solutions from presidential candidates. Our future depends on it."

According to an article in the *New York Times*, the project would rank as "one of the most expensive single-issue initiatives ever in a presidential race." It said that the campaign would "dwarf" the \$22.4 million that the Swift Vets and P.O.W.s for Truth group spent against Senator John Kerry in 2004 and the \$7.8 million spent on advocacy that year by AARP, the lobby group for older Americans.

More information on the Strong American Schools campaign is available at <http://edin08.com/AboutUs.aspx>.

***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.



ALLIANCE FOR  
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

1201 Connecticut Ave., NW  
Suite 901  
Washington, DC 20036

Phone 202 828-0828  
Fax 202 828-0821  
Alliance@all4ed.org  
www.all4ed.org

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**Bob Wise**  
President

**Jason Amos**  
Editor

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