



StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



“QUALITY EDUCATION TOO LONG DELAYED IS EDUCATION DENIED”: In Campaign-Like Speech, Secretary Duncan Turns Up the Heat on ESEA Reauthorization

Pushed to the back burner by the economic recession and health care debate, among other issues, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) received a much-needed spark from a speech that **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** gave on September 24. In a campaign-style speech that was as much a rallying cry as it was a policy proposal, Duncan evoked [Dr. Martin Luther King’s letter from the Birmingham City Jail](#) in making his case for why education reform cannot wait.

“Quality education too long delayed is education denied,” Duncan said. “We are now in our fifth decade of ESEA—nearly half a century of education reform and direct federal involvement in this state and local issue,” Duncan said. “We’ve had five decades of reforms, countless studies, watershed reports like *A Nation At Risk*, and repeated affirmations and commitments from the body politic to finally make education a national priority. And yet we are still waiting for the day when every child in America has a high-quality education that prepares him or her for the future.”

Duncan offered praise for the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)—the current incarnation of ESEA. He credited the law for exposing achievement gaps, expanding the standards and accountability movement, and focusing on outcomes—not inputs—to measure education reform efforts. However, he also said that NCLB unfairly labels many schools as failures even when they are making real progress, adding that the current law places too much emphasis on test scores rather than student growth, and is “overly prescriptive in some ways while it is too blunt an instrument of reform in others.”

Duncan also took NCLB to task for encouraging states to set low academic standards. He cited the failure to set high standards as one reason why millions of students are not completing college. “They are simply not ready for college-level work when they leave high school,” he said. He also said that low standards have contributed to the nation’s “staggeringly” high dropout rate.

In regard to policy, Duncan did not offer specific proposals; instead he chose to present broad outlines and themes. Specifically, he said that the role in Washington, DC is to “support reform by encouraging high standards, bold approaches to helping struggling schools, closing the

achievement gap, strengthening the field of education, reducing the dropout rate and boosting college access. All of this must lead to more students completing college.”

Duncan also said that the federal government should be “tight on the goals—with clear standards set by states that truly prepare young people for college and careers” but “loose on the means for meeting those goals.” He added that local educators do not need a prescription for success, but he said that they do need a common definition of success that focuses on student achievement, high school graduation, and success and attainment in college.

He hinted that merit pay for teachers would be a consideration during the reauthorization of ESEA. “Let’s build a law that respects the honored, noble status of educators, who should be valued as skilled professionals rather than mere practitioners and compensated accordingly,” he said. “Let us end the culture of blame, self-interest, and disrespect that has demeaned the field of education. Instead, let’s encourage, recognize, and reward excellence in teaching and be honest with each other when it is absent.”

Duncan also took a shot at the provision in NCLB requiring all students to be 100 percent proficient in reading and math by 2014. “Let us build a law that demands real accountability tied to growth and gain both in the individual classroom and in the entire school—rather than utopian goals,” he said. “A law that encourages educators to work with children at every level—the gifted and the struggling—and not just the tiny percent near the middle who can be lifted over a mediocre bar of proficiency with minimal effort. That’s not education. That’s game-playing tied to bad tests with the wrong goals.”

While Duncan did not lay out a specific timeline for ESEA reauthorization, he did say that the Obama administration would be developing a proposal “over the coming months.” But above all, Duncan stressed the need for timely action.

“And to those who say that we can’t do this right now—we need more time to prepare and study the problem—or the timing and the politics isn’t right—I say that our kids can’t wait and our future won’t wait,” he said. “More than any other issue, education is the civil rights issue of our generation and it can’t wait—because tomorrow won’t wait—the world won’t wait—and our children won’t wait.”

In reaction to Duncan’s speech, **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**, said that Duncan’s speech can “push vitally needed education reform ‘over the top.’” Noting that one third of the nation’s high school students drop out and another third graduate unprepared for college or careers, Wise said delaying action on ESEA reauthorization is “neither an acceptable education policy nor a smart political strategy.”

Wise credited NCLB for its focus on data gathering and accountability, but he noted that current law “neither effectively addresses nor funds” the unique problems of the nation’s high schools. “Just when our young people reach the jumping off place for college and careers, the federal support drops off,” he said.

[Read Secretary Duncan’s complete speech.](#)

[Read Governor Wise’s complete statement.](#)



GRADUATION PROMISE ACT: New Legislation Would Provide \$2.5 Billion for Low-Performing High Schools

Low-performing high schools would be eligible for \$2.5 billion in federal funds under new legislation introduced on September 23 by **U.S. Senator Jeff Bingaman (D-NM)**. The bill, the Graduation Promise Act (GPA), or S. 1698, would provide money to districts and states to help them implement effective, research-based reforms tailored to the specific needs of high schools. Joining Bingaman as original cosponsors of the legislation are **Senators Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Bob Casey (D-PA), Christopher Dodd (D-CT), Al Franken (D-MN), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Patty Murray (D-WA), Jack Reed (D-RI), and Harry Reid (D-NV)**.

“We cannot afford to let underperforming high schools continue to push students off the path to prosperity,” said Bingaman. “We must ensure our nation’s economic competitiveness by promising each high school student a chance to gain the skills and knowledge necessary to pursue his or her dreams and succeed in college or the workplace. The Graduation Promise Act will help to make that possible.”

According to research from Johns Hopkins University, about two thousand high schools in the United States, or about 12 percent, account for over half of all high school dropouts and nearly two thirds of all minority dropouts. In these “dropout factories,” as they have been dubbed, graduation rates routinely fall below 60 percent. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, however, only a little more than half of these schools are eligible for Title I funds—the percentage of schools that actually receive funds is believed to be even lower.

By targeting this relatively small number of low-performing high schools, GPA, if enacted, would fundamentally improve educational outcomes for students in these schools while providing an immediate boost to the nation’s high school graduation rate, which has remained largely unchanged for decades. At the same time, GPA would also create an appropriate federal role in reforming the nation’s secondary schools, which are largely ignored under NCLB.

Specifically, GPA would authorize \$2.44 billion to create a High School Improvement and Dropout Reduction Fund focused on transforming the nation’s lowest-performing high schools. Such a fund would help states and local school districts identify high schools with low graduation and student achievement rates and provide them with the resources necessary to implement research-based interventions. Funding would be awarded through competitive grants to schools that partner with local communities, businesses, and other entities to create proven dropout prevention strategies such as mentoring and apprenticeship programs and early college high schools.

The second component of the legislation is a \$60 million competitive grant program that would promote the development and implementation of successful school models that are geared toward students who struggle in conventional education settings.

“Focusing on the nation’s lowest-performing high schools will produce immediate gains by turning thousands of dropouts into graduates,” said Alliance for Excellent Education President

Bob Wise. “By introducing the Graduation Promise Act, these Senators have shown the will to address this problem; their legislation shows the way.”

Read Senator Bingaman’s complete statement at <http://bingaman.senate.gov/news/20090923-01.cfm>.

More information on the Graduation Promise Act, including a one-page summary, is available at http://www.all4ed.org/federal_policy/legislative_updates/graduation_promise_act_111th.

Appropriations Update: With Appropriations Bills Behind Schedule, Congress to Enact a One Month Continuing Resolution to Keep the Federal Government Running

With a new fiscal year set to begin on October 1 and Congress yet to enact all twelve appropriations bills for Fiscal Year (FY) 2010, it was necessary for the House of Representatives to pass a stopgap funding resolution to keep the government running. Passed in the House on September 25, the one-month continuing resolution (CR) will give Congress more time to pass the remaining appropriations bills. During the week of September 28, the Senate is scheduled to consider the CR, which was wrapped into the Fiscal Year 2010 Legislative Branch appropriations bill. Shortly thereafter, it will go to President Obama for his signature.

Although the House has passed its versions of all twelve appropriations bills, the Senate has passed only six for the fiscal year that starts on October 1. Among the bills yet to receive consideration on the Senate floor is the FY 2010 Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education appropriations bill.

Earlier this year, on July 24, the House of Representatives passed its version of the FY 2010 Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill. And while the bill has yet to reach the Senate floor, the Senate Appropriations Committee passed its version of the Labor-HHS-Education bill on July 30.

Under the House-passed bill, the U.S. Department of Education would receive \$64.2 billion for FY 2010, an amount that is slightly more than the \$63.5 billion contained in the version passed by the Senate Appropriations Committee. The U.S. Department of Education received \$62.6 billion in FY 2009.

More information on both versions of the FY 2010 Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill is available at http://www.all4ed.org/publication_material/straight_as/08102009#EdBill.



ALLIANCE FOR EXCELLENT EDUCATION UNVEILS NEW MODEL LINKING HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES TO ECONOMIC RECOVERY

If twelve of the nation’s largest cities were to reduce the number of dropouts for a single high school class by just 50 percent, they would see a total of more than \$1.5 billion per year in additional wages and 61,800 new homeowners, according to a new economic analysis by the Alliance for Excellent Education.

“As these findings show, the best economic stimulus is a high school diploma,” said Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise. “Given the state of high schools in the United States, it is imperative that the nation focus attention on students most at risk of dropping out if it is to achieve long-term economic stability. In an Information Age economy, education is the main currency.”

In its past economic analyses, the Alliance has calculated the financial impact that high school dropouts have on the [national economy and individual state economies](#). However, in an effort to

better understand the various economic benefits that a particular urban area could expect were it to reduce its number of high school dropouts, the Alliance for Excellent Education, with the generous support of State Farm®, has developed a sophisticated economic model in partnership with Economic Modeling Specialists Inc.

The model allows various economic projections to be made for U.S. Census-defined metropolitan statistical areas (MSA), which consist of both a central urban area and the surrounding geographic area that has strong social and economic ties to that city. Projections for economic benefits are estimated using graduation rates calculated by Editorial Projects in Education for all public school districts located within a metropolitan area.

“As a business leader I’m committed to a quality education for all children and to strengthening the vitality of our communities,” said **Edward B. Rust Jr., chairman and chief executive officer of State Farm®**. “These economic indicators demonstrate that graduating from high school has significant consequences. We must continue to collaborate and assure that all of our students graduate from high school with the skills necessary to compete in a global economy and a world of life long learning.”

In its initial analysis, the Alliance determined the economic benefits that twelve cities would see were they to reduce by 50 percent the number of students who fail to graduate with their class. The results are displayed in the table below.

Metropolitan Area	Combined Additional Wages in Average Year ¹	Percent of New Graduates Continuing Education Beyond High School ²	Number of New Graduates Who Would Purchase Homes in the Metro Area ³
Atlanta, GA	\$145 million	44 percent	8,000
Chicago, IL	\$200 million	50 percent	10,000
Detroit, MI	\$130 million	45 percent	8,000
Houston, TX	\$150 million	45 percent	7,500
Indianapolis, IN	\$40 million	47 percent	2,000
Jackson, MS	\$16 million	49 percent	1,000
Louisville, KY	\$25 million	34 percent	1,500
Nashville, TN	\$28 million	35 percent	1,800
New Orleans, LA	\$41 million	43 percent	2,500
New York, NY	\$500 million	53 percent	14,000
Oakland, CA	\$108 million	71 percent	2,500
Washington, DC	\$143 million	57 percent	3,000

In the coming months, the Alliance will be releasing additional findings for the forty-five largest U.S. Census-defined MSAs. Detailed reports for each metro area listed above are available at http://www.all4ed.org/publication_material/EconMSA.

¹ By earning diplomas—and in many cases, continuing their education—these new high school graduates would earn additional wages each year compared to their likely earnings had they dropped out.

² After earning their diplomas, many new graduates would continue their education after high school, some continuing far enough to earn a PhD or professional degree.

³ With their additional degrees and increased wages, these new high school graduates would be better positioned to buy homes rather than rent.



HELPING STUDENTS NAVIGATE THE PATH TO COLLEGE: New Report From the What Works Clearinghouse Examines What High Schools Can Do to Boost College Enrollment

In August, ACT announced that only 23 percent of high school graduates from the Class of 2009 were ready to earn at least a “C” or higher in first-year college courses based on their scores in the four subject areas that ACT tests (English, math, reading, and science). While the percentage of students considered “college ready” in individual subjects was higher, [ACT reported](#) that a significant portion of high school graduates would need remediation in each subject. Specifically, only 67 percent were considered college ready in English, compared to 53 percent in reading, 42 percent in mathematics, and 28 percent in science.

In an effort to help more high schools graduate their students prepared for college, the What Works Clearinghouse recently released *Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do*, a practice guide for high schools and school districts.⁴ The guide contains five recommendations on what educators, administrators, and policymakers can do, beginning in the ninth grade, to prepare students academically for college, assist them in completing the steps to college entry, and improve their likelihood of enrolling in college.

Recommendation 1: Offer courses and curricula that prepare students for college-level work, and ensure that students understand what constitutes a college-ready curriculum by ninth grade.

Although the report notes that every student should leave high school with the skills required to attend a two- or four-year institution, it acknowledges that low-income and first generation students are less likely than other students to complete a rigorous high school curriculum that prepares them for college. To better ensure that all students can take rigorous courses in high school, the report recommends that high schools should offer, as a default, a college-ready curriculum that includes specific courses in key subjects.

The report includes six examples of college-preparatory course requirements from around the country and, while it finds slight differences in the requirements, it notes that all six examples require four years of English, at least three years of mathematics, two or three years of science and social studies, and one to two years of a foreign language.

Recommendation 2: Utilize assessment measures throughout high school so that students are aware of how prepared they are for college, and assist them in overcoming deficiencies as they are identified.

Noting that 60 percent of college students are required to take a remedial course as a condition of enrollment, the report stresses the importance of high school assessments to determine whether students are on track for college matriculation. In addition, it also encourages high schools to gather information on postsecondary enrollment for past students to determine how well the

⁴ The What Works Clearinghouse is an initiative of the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences. More information on it is available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>.

schools are preparing students for college. For students who go off track, the report suggests that high schools create individualized plans for students to help them catch up.

Recommendation 3: Surround students with adults and peers who build and support their college aspirations.

The report finds that college students and college-educated adults can serve as mentors for high schools and provide guidance and support throughout the college-preparation process. It suggests that high schools facilitate these relationships through extracurricular activities such as debate clubs, or through career exploration activities such as job shadowing programs.

Recommendation 4: Engage and assist students in completing critical steps for college entry.

As part of this recommendation, the report calls on high schools to ensure that students prepare for, and take, appropriate college-entrance or admissions exams. It recommends that students begin taking practice exams by the eleventh grade and the actual exam before the twelfth grade. “Students who wait until their senior year to take the actual exam could miss a college application deadline or not have an opportunity to retake the test,” the report reads.

The report also suggests that high schools help students find a postsecondary program that matches their qualifications, interests, and goals, coordinates college visits, and assists students with the completion of college applications.

Recommendation 5: Increase families’ financial awareness, and help students apply for financial aid.

Noting that first-generation students and students from low-income families often have limited knowledge of financial aid opportunities and may overestimate the cost of college, the report suggests that high schools organize workshops for parents and students to inform them—prior to twelfth grade—about college affordability, scholarship and aid sources, and the financial aid process. It also suggests that high schools help students and parents complete financial aid forms prior to eligibility deadlines.

After each recommendation, the report includes a series of action steps necessary to ensure that the recommendation is faithfully implemented. In addition, it acknowledges a series of roadblocks that schools may encounter when implementing the recommendation—such as limited training or time constraints among teachers and counselors—and provides solutions to navigate these roadblocks.

The complete report is available at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/higher_ed_pg_091509.pdf.

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.