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Public Education Policy And Progress



INFORMING ADOLESCENT LITERACY POLICY AND PRACTICE: Alliance Brief Offers Lessons Learned from Federal Efforts to Improve Literacy Skills of Middle and High School Students

To help improve the literacy skills of adolescent readers who struggle to read at grade level, the U.S. Department of Education recently announced that [eight states will receive \\$6.6 million in Striving Readers grants](#). The grants range from approximately \$600,000 for the Virginia Department of Education to nearly \$1.3 million for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

“When students enter middle and high school with reading skills that are significantly below grade level, they are at great risk of dropping out,” **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** said when announcing the grants. “Programs like Striving Readers give students a chance to improve their reading skills and succeed in school and in life.”

According to the release from the department, grantees may use funds for interventions for middle and high school-aged students to improve basic reading skills, motivation, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension using research-based programs. Grantees may also use the funds for professional development aligned with scientifically based reading research, reading assessments, and to design and implement a rigorous evaluation.

To assist the new grantees, as well as to inform policymakers looking to expand federal efforts to improve reading and comprehension among middle and high school students, the Alliance for Excellent Education has released a new policy brief that highlights lessons learned from the experiences of previous Striving Readers grantees.

The brief, *Informing Adolescent Literacy Policy and Practice: Lessons Learned from the Striving Readers Program*, notes that recent efforts to improve literacy have tended to focus largely on the early years, and often at the expense of secondary students. As a result, reading and comprehension skills of students in the primary grades have improved, but achievement for middle and secondary students has remained virtually unchanged.

“The nation’s approach to teaching reading is analogous to a builder helping to lay the foundation of a house, but not following through to assist with the walls, windows, doors, and roof,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “America’s students are getting the help they need to become proficient readers in the early grades, but they are not being supported in building the vocabulary

and comprehension skills they need to master the more complex materials they will encounter in middle and high school across all of their classes.”

For the last two years, the Striving Readers program, which is the main federal effort aimed at reversing these trends at the secondary school level, has operated at eight sites—six large school districts, one consortium of multiple rural districts, and one statewide education system for students in the juvenile justice system.

In developing the brief, the Alliance convened representatives from seven of the eight initial Striving Readers grantees, as well as other experts in adolescent literacy research, to guide efforts to expand adolescent literacy instruction at the federal, state, and district levels. The brief relays the following lessons from these experiences:

- **Allow sufficient time for planning and launching the program.** Educators, administrators, policymakers, and others who are considering creating an adolescent literacy program for their school or district need to devote sufficient time and attention during the start-up phase in order to lay a solid foundation.
- **Choose the best program.** Schools or districts should have an extended discussion among the parties who will be responsible for executing and evaluating the model and then select an intensive intervention model that meets the needs of struggling readers.
- **Build ownership and capacity.** Perhaps the most essential task when contemplating putting an adolescent literacy program in place is to build ownership among classroom teachers, as well as district and school leaders—which includes teacher leaders and key stakeholders—so that the program survives beyond infancy.
- **Maintain fidelity and accountability.** School and district leaders should ensure that the literacy program is implemented as designed.
- **Build the knowledge base while supporting student learning.** Given the dearth of effective and sustained adolescent literacy programs across the nation, the ultimate goals when creating these programs are to serve students and schools well *and* generate information based on data that can be used or replicated by policymakers or other schools.

The brief also makes several recommendations for how the federal government can promote a more cohesive and comprehensive literacy effort for secondary school students. For example, it suggests the federal government invest in literacy reform from pre-K through grade twelve and ensure equitable funding for all grades. The brief also recommends that the federal government include a comprehensive adolescent literacy component as part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Informing Adolescent Literacy Policy and Practice: Lessons Learned from the Striving Readers Program is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/PolicyBriefStrivingReadersInformsPolicy.pdf>.

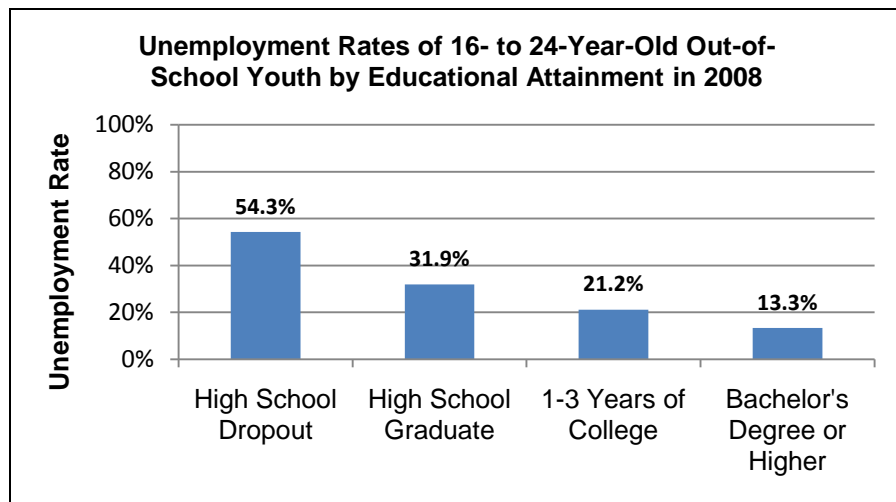


THE CONSEQUENCES OF DROPPING OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL: Average High School Dropout Has a Negative Net Fiscal Contribution to Society of \$5,200, Says New Report

According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, high school dropouts are having a harder time finding and keeping jobs than individuals with higher levels of education. In fact, the national unemployment rate for high school dropouts in July 2009 was 15.4 percent, compared to 9.4 percent for high school graduates, 7.9 percent for individuals with some college credits or an associate's degree, and 4.7 percent for individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher.

However, a new report from the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University finds that young adult high school dropouts—individuals aged sixteen to twenty-four—face even more difficulty in the labor market. The report, *The Consequences of Dropping Out of High School: Joblessness and Jailing for High School Dropouts and the High Cost for Taxpayers*, also examines other problems such as lower earnings and higher incarceration rates that affect young adult dropouts more disproportionately than their better-educated peers. It concludes that the average high school dropout will have a **negative net fiscal contribution to society of nearly \$5,200**, while the average high school graduate generates a positive lifetime net fiscal contribution of \$287,000 from age eighteen to sixty-four.

According to the report, young high school dropouts are much less likely to be active labor force participants than their higher-educated peers and frequently experience considerably higher unemployment rates when they do seek work. As noted in the chart below, on average, approximately 54 percent of the nation's young high school dropouts were unemployed in 2008, compared to nearly 32 percent of young high school graduates—a difference of more than 22 percentage points.



The report also breaks out unemployment rates by various subgroups and finds large differences. For example, young black high school dropouts, with a 68.6 unemployment rate, were most likely to be without a job, compared to 53.9 percent of young white dropouts and 46.9 percent of young Hispanic dropouts. The report attributes the below average unemployment rates of Hispanic dropouts to the significantly higher employment rates of young Hispanic immigrants,

many of whom are undocumented immigrants. It notes that previous research has found that higher levels of new immigration in a state tend to significantly reduce the employment rates of the nation's teens and young adults, especially males, non-college-educated youth, and native-born black and Hispanic males with limited postsecondary schooling.

Because young high school dropouts were less likely to be employed and more likely to earn lower wages when employed, their mean annual earnings were only \$8,358 in 2007, compared to more than \$14,500 for young high school graduates, nearly \$18,300 for individuals with some college, and approximately \$24,800 for their peers with a bachelor's degree or higher. The report notes that the earning power of male high school dropouts has "declined considerably" over the past few decades, "reducing their marriage rates, home ownership rates, and their fiscal contributions to federal, state, and local governments."

Citing the 2006 and 2007 American Community Surveys (ACS), the report finds strong links between educational attainment and teen and young adult parenting. According to the ACS, 13.5 percent of the 18.6 million women ages sixteen to twenty-four had given birth to one or more offspring at the time of the survey. It also finds that the share of women who were mothers varied quite considerably across education attainment, with young female dropouts six times as likely to have given birth as compared to their peers who were college students or four-year college graduates.

Specifically, 37.8 percent of female high school dropouts aged sixteen to twenty-four were mothers, compared to 29.8 percent of high school graduates, and 6.4 percent of bachelor's degree recipients. Overall, 8 percent of the women in the study were single mothers, but high school dropouts (23 percent) were nearly nine times more likely to become single mothers than women with bachelor's degrees (2.6 percent).

The report also relies on 2006 and 2007 ACS surveys to determine the percentage of sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds in selected educational attainment groups who were in correctional facilities. It finds that while only 0.1 percent of young bachelor's degree recipients and 1 percent of high school graduates were institutionalized, 6.3 percent of high school dropouts were institutionalized.¹ After breaking out data for young males, the report finds that "nearly 1 of every 10 young male high school dropouts was institutionalized on a given day in 2006–2007 versus fewer than 1 of 33 high school graduates. Young black males were especially affected—23 percent of sixteen- to twenty-four-year-old black male high school dropouts were incarcerated in 2006–2007, compared to 6.1 percent of Hispanics, 6.6 percent of whites, and 7.2 percent of Asians."

The report examines tax revenues, incarceration costs, and other economic factors to determine that the average high school dropout will have a negative net fiscal contribution to society of nearly \$5,200 over his or her working lifetime, compared to a positive lifetime net fiscal contribution of \$287,000 for the average high school graduate. "Adult dropouts in the U.S. in

¹ According to the report, the U.S. Census Bureau does not identify the specific type of institution in which an individual was housed at the time of the ACS survey. A small fraction of institutionalized young adults were living in long-term health care facilities (nursing homes, mental hospitals), but the vast majority (93 percent) were residing in adult correctional institutions and juvenile detention facilities.

recent years have been a major fiscal burden to the rest of society,” the report reads. “Given the current and projected deficits of the federal government, the fiscal burden of supporting dropouts and their families is no longer sustainable.”

Read the complete report at <http://tinyurl.com/yzga2c9>.



AVERAGED FRESHMAN GRADUATION RATE: U.S. Department of Education Reports 73.9 Percent Graduation Rate for 2006-07 School Year

In a report released earlier this month, the U.S. Department of Education estimates that 73.9 percent of public high school students received a diploma in the 2006-07 school year. These statistics are calculated according to the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR), which uses three years of student enrollment data to estimate percent of students receiving a regular diploma within four years.² AFGR is not as accurate as an on-time graduation rate calculated from actual data about a specific group of students collected over four years, or the calculation that will be required under [new regulations issued by the U.S. Department of Education in October 2008](#).³ However, it does allow for comparisons across states and over time, and can be used as a reasonable substitute until all states can calculate the four-year rate.

Among individual states, eighteen states demonstrated a percentage point or greater increase in their AFGR from the previous school year while seven states saw a decrease of one percentage point or more. In the remaining twenty-three states for which there was available data, the change was less than one percentage point in either direction. The rate ranged from a low of 52 percent in Nevada to a high of 88.6 percent in Vermont. Sixteen states had rates of 80 percent or higher while twelve states and the District of Columbia had rates below 70 percent.

Highest and Lowest Graduation Rates by AFGR

State	AFGR	State	AFGR
Vermont	88.6%	Nevada	52.0%
Wisconsin	88.5%	Washington, DC	54.9%
Iowa	86.5%	South Carolina	58.9%
Minnesota	86.5%	New Mexico	59.1%
Nebraska	86.3%	Louisiana	61.3%

The AFGR was highest for Asian/Pacific Islanders (91.4 percent), followed by whites (80.3 percent), Hispanics (62.3 percent), American Indians (61.3 percent), and African Americans (60.3 percent).

The complete report, which includes a breakdown for all fifty states, is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010313.pdf>.

² For the AFGR, the incoming freshman class size is estimated by summing the enrollment in 8th grade in 1 year, 9th grade for the next year, and 10th grade for the year after, and then dividing by three. The averaging is intended to account for prior year retentions in the ninth grade.

³ In March 2009, the Alliance released *Every Student Counts: The Role of Federal Policy in Improving Graduation Rate Accountability*, a brief that summarizes these regulations and examines how individual states will be affected by the changes. Both the national brief and the individual state briefs are available at http://www.all4ed.org/publication_material/federal_grp.

Virginia Reports 83.2 Percent Graduation Rate for Class of 2009

On October 20, the Virginia Department of Education reported that 83.2 percent of students in the Class of 2009 earned their diplomas on time, an increase of 1 percent over the Class of 2008. Asian students, at 93.3 percent, had the highest graduation rates, followed by whites (87 percent), African Americans (75.7 percent), and Hispanics (72.3 percent). The graduation rate represents the percentage of students who were first-time ninth-graders during the 2005–06 school year and earned a Board of Education-approved diploma within four years.

“A one-point increase in the graduation rate represents nearly one thousand additional young men and women who earned diplomas and are ready for postsecondary education or entry level employment,” said **Patricia I. Wright, Virginia’s superintendent of public instruction**. “Building a long-term trend of rising graduation rates will require a continued student-by-student approach by educators, as well as the sustained involvement of parents and strong partnerships with community institutions.”

To perform the calculation, Virginia relied on its longitudinal tracking system, which allows the state to track individual students from year to year and account for student mobility and retention. This is the second year that the state used this method to calculate its graduation rate.

In addition to helping the state report a more reliable graduation rate, the longitudinal data system also allows Virginia to look for patterns among students who drop out. For example, 51.4 percent of students who dropped out did so by the end of the tenth grade. Additionally, students who repeated grades, were frequently absent, and/or attended multiple schools were more likely to drop out.

Data for individual schools and groups of students is available from the Virginia Department of Education at <http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/NewHome/pressreleases/2009/oct20.html>.



THE NEXT GENERATION OF SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY: New Report Examines How to Improve Graduation Rates and Student Achievement Levels in SREB States

Although high school graduation rates have significantly improved across the sixteen Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) states since 2000, there is still much work to be done. That is the message from a recent SREB report entitled *The Next Generation of School Accountability: A Blueprint for Raising High School Achievement and Graduation Rates in SREB States*. The study calls on state leaders to take part in the solutions phase of improving student achievement in high school and beyond.

“Without more students graduating from high school—and then completing two- and four-year degrees and advanced career training—our nation’s economic future is at risk and the South’s quality of life will dwindle. Our states’ education policies will set the course,” writes **Dave Spence, president of SREB**, in the opening message of the report.

The study emphasizes the negative economic consequences of not immediately addressing the dropout crisis and calls for the “political courage” to apply what has been learned at successful high schools to effective state policy solutions. In a list of ten guiding principles, the report outlines strategies for southern states to improve their school accountability systems. Chief among the recommendations is to give equal weight to graduation and achievement in determining school performance. The report argues that increasing graduation rates should be a parallel objective (rather than a secondary objective) to improving student achievement.

Setting *ambitious* yet *realistic* goals in improving graduation rates is another key recommendation for ensuring that more students graduate college and career ready. Specifically, the report's authors propose that all SREB states strive for an average statewide graduation rate of 90 percent with the recognition that not all schools will start at the same spot, but they should arrive at the same end.

Throughout the study, the authors caution against lowering standards in an attempt to help more students meet expectations. However, the report also warns that the pressure to meet Adequate Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind has caused many teachers and administrators to overlook struggling students. In order to reach the right balance, the report advises that schools set high standards while providing an engaging curriculum with challenging and meaningful opportunities to learn.

Beyond the traditional ways of learning, the report encourages schools to “broaden the definition of academic rigor to include career/technical programs of study that join a ‘ready’ academic core with a coherent sequence of quality CT courses.” These types of programs are particularly relevant to the at-risk group of high schools students who fail to envision a clear career path. **Gene Bottoms, SREB senior vice president**, challenges states to “define in policy what intellectually demanding career/technical studies look like.”

Additionally, SREB suggests it is imperative to not only concentrate on school failures, but also to recognize the districts, schools, and teachers making real progress. The schools thriving with improvements should be rewarded with funding incentives as well as be required to document their success stories for the purpose of spreading best practices.

The other guiding principles include strengthening middle grades students' transitions into high school and reducing ninth-grade failure rates; recognizing that one path to graduation does not fit all students; bringing dropouts back into the education system; targeting schools with the lowest achievement levels and graduation rates for major improvements; and making better use of the senior year to prepare students for graduation and give students a jump-start on college and careers.

The recommendations were informed by members of the SREB Committee to Improve High School Graduation Rates and Achievement, led by Georgia **Governor Sonny Perdue (R)**. Member states of SREB include Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

To read the full report, visit http://publications.sreb.org/2009/09V17_Blueprint_Highschools.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.