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OBAMA OUTLINES EDUCATION AGENDA: President Calls for “World-Class Standards” and an End to the High School Dropout “Epidemic”

Saying that it was time to give all Americans a “complete and competitive education from cradle up through a career” and make America’s entire education system the “envy of the world,” President Barack Obama outlined a sweeping education reform agenda in a March 10 [speech to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce](#). Obama grouped his education reform agenda into five pillars including early childhood initiatives; better standards and assessments; recruiting, preparing, and rewarding outstanding teachers; promoting innovation and excellence; and providing every American with a quality higher education. He also focused on the importance of world-class standards, data systems that can track students’ academic progress, and the need to focus on the two thousand high schools that account for over 50 percent of the nation’s dropouts.

As in past speeches, the president stressed the important role that education must play in helping the economy recover. “America will not remain true to its highest ideals—and America’s place as a global economic leader will be put at risk—unless we not only bring down the crushing cost of health care and transform the way we use energy, but also if we don’t do a far better job than we’ve been doing of educating our sons and daughters; unless we give them the knowledge and skills they need in this new and changing world,” Obama said. “For we know that economic progress and educational achievement have always gone hand in hand in America.”

Noting that “source of America’s prosperity has never been merely how ably we accumulate wealth, but how well we educate our people,” Obama rattled off a list of successful education investments from the past, including land-grant colleges, public high schools, the GI Bill, and the math and science investments made under President Eisenhower. “So let there be no doubt,” he said, “...the future belongs to the nation that best educates its citizens.”

But, Obama explained, the United States is not currently that nation. “Despite resources that are unmatched anywhere in the world, we’ve let our grades slip, our schools crumble, our teacher quality fall short, and other nations outpace us,” he said. Obama He noted that American eighth graders had fallen to ninth place in math and that only one third of the nation’s thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds read as well as they should. He also expressed dismay at the “stubborn” achievement gap that exists between white students and their African American and Latino classmates, adding, “...the relative decline of American education is untenable for our economy, it’s unsustainable for our democracy, it’s unacceptable for our children—and we can’t afford to let it continue.”

Something else that Obama said could not continue was the high school dropout crisis. “To any student who’s watching, I say this: don’t even think about dropping out of school,” Obama said. “As I said a couple of weeks ago, dropping out is quitting on yourself, it’s quitting on your country, and it is not an option – not anymore. ... It is time for all of us, no matter what our backgrounds, to come together and solve this epidemic.”

To help more students graduate from high school, Obama called for a greater focus on turning the two thousand low-performing high schools around the country that account for over 50 percent of the nation’s dropouts. He called on educators, lawmakers, parents, and teachers to make turning around these schools a “collective responsibility.” Obama said that his budget would invest in developing new strategies to prevent at-risk students from dropping out while helping students who have already dropped out get back into school and on a path to graduation.

Obama challenged states to set “world-class standards” and to end the “race to the bottom” whereby states lower their standards to ensure that more students pass their tests and schools make Adequate Yearly Progress. “Today’s system of fifty different sets of benchmarks for academic success means fourth-grade readers in Mississippi are scoring nearly 70 points lower than students in Wyoming—and getting the same grade,” he said. “Eight of our states are setting their standards so low that their students may end up on par with roughly the bottom 40 percent of the world.” Obama singled out Massachusetts, where students tie for first in the world in science, and called on states to follow its example. He also called on the nation’s governors and state education chiefs to develop standards and assessments that measure whether students have acquired the skills necessary to succeed in the twenty-first-century job market.

The president stressed the importance of data systems that can track a student “from childhood through college” and provide teachers and principals with the information they need to ensure that students are prepared to meet higher standards. The recently enacted American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provides \$250 million for data systems, which Obama said can help improve student achievement by identifying where students struggle while also revealing the teachers who have the most impact on student performance.

Once identified, good teachers would be rewarded with more money for improved student achievement under Obama’s plan. He would also create new pathways to teaching and provide new incentives to encourage teachers to teach in hard-to-staff schools and high-need subjects such as math and science. He would also hold teachers more accountable for their school’s performance, while providing them with more support and guidance to help them improve. Under his plan, new teachers would be mentored by more experienced ones while bad teachers would be removed from the classroom. “Let me be clear,” Obama said, “if a teacher is given a chance but still does not improve, there is no excuse for that person to continue teaching. I reject a system that rewards failure and protects a person from its consequences. The stakes are too high. We can afford nothing but the best when it comes to our children’s teachers and to the schools where they teach.”

Obama also expressed support for expanding charter schools, but stressed that new charter schools should go through a rigorous selection and review process to ensure that their autonomy is “coupled with greater accountability.” The president also called for a longer academic

calendar, which would include longer school days, longer school years, and an expansion of afterschool programs. “We can no longer afford an academic calendar designed when America was a nation of farmers who needed their children at home plowing the land at the end of each day,” Obama said. “That calendar may have once made sense, but today, it puts us at a competitive disadvantage. Our children spend over a month less in school than children in South Korea. That is no way to prepare them for a twenty-first-century economy.”



NEW ALLIANCE PUBLICATION EXAMINES FEDERAL GRADUATION RATE POLICY: Brief Reviews Recent U.S. Department of Education Regulations and Their Impact on States and the Nation

A new brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education describes how federal policy has progressed from early attempts to simply calculate an agreed-upon high school graduation rate to present-day efforts aimed at using commonly defined rates as part of a refined accountability system to drive school improvement. The brief, *Every Student Counts: The Role of Federal Policy in Improving Graduation Rate Accountability*, includes a national and state-by-state analysis of the impact of the graduation rate regulations issued by the U.S. Department of Education in October 2008.

“Because more states are doing a better job of measuring high school graduation rates, they’re beginning to discover that not as many students are receiving their diploma as they originally thought,” said Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia. “But simply identifying the problem isn’t enough. If I go to the doctor and leave with a diagnosis but no medicine, I’m not going to see any improvement. Today, the medicine that states and high schools need is to be held accountable for improving graduation rates. And if more states make graduation rates an essential component of their accountability systems, it will trigger attention and resources to low-performing high schools and lead to improved outcomes for students.”

The brief notes that the combination of inappropriate data, misleading calculations, and a lack of accountability for improvement created an environment in which the high school graduation rate crisis was unacknowledged and unaddressed prior to the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Although NCLB helped raise awareness about this crisis, policies around high school graduation rates continue to be muddled at best. In October 2008, in an effort to shine some light on graduation rates and improve graduation rate policy, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) announced new federal regulations and guidance that changed NCLB’s requirements related to graduation rate data collection, calculation, and accountability.

The brief acknowledges that these new regulations, as well as work done by the National Governors Association and other organizations, are positive steps in the right direction, but argues that much more work needs to be done to provide clear and high expectations for graduation rate goals and growth. To help make graduation rates more useful in identifying and intervening in low-performing high schools, the brief, which was made possible through the support of the AT&T Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, makes several recommendations.

First, it says that states should be required to produce consistent and accurate calculations of graduation rates based on data that can follow students through their high school career. Second, it recommends that states include aggressive, attainable, and uniform requirements on how much schools, districts, and that states should improve their graduation rates each year as part of the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) determinations included in NCLB. Such a requirement would ensure a minimum, consistent increase in graduation rates, as is currently required for test scores.

While NCLB holds schools accountable for test scores, it does not do the same for graduation rates. The brief recommends that states give equal weight to graduation rates and test scores in AYP determinations so that schools have balanced incentives, both to ensure that their students graduate *and* to raise test scores, instead of doing one at the expense of the other. Finally, it suggests that states be required to break down graduation rates by student subgroups (race, ethnicity, income, etc.) for reporting and accountability purposes and to ensure that school improvement activities focus on all students and close achievement gaps.

In concert with the release of *Every Student Counts: The Role of Federal Policy in Improving Graduation Rate Accountability*, the Alliance for Excellent Education created individual state briefs that outline a state's current high school graduation policies and describe how recent regulations from the U.S. Department of Education could impact these policies. The state briefs also highlight the policy concerns and hurdles that are unique to the state and must still be addressed. Specifically, they examine the formula that each state uses to calculate its high school graduation rate, and which individuals it counts as high school graduates. It also looks at the long-term and annual improvement goals that the state has set for its high school graduation rate, evaluates the data system that the state uses to calculate a four-year high school graduation rate, and the role that graduation rates play in the state accountability systems.

Every Student Counts: The Role of Federal Policy in Improving Graduation Rate Accountability can be found at http://www.all4ed.org/files/ESC_FedPolicyGRA.pdf.

Individual state briefs are available at http://www.all4ed.org/publication_material/federal_grp.



EVERY STUDENT COUNTS: Senator Tom Harkin and Representative Bobby Scott Introduce Legislation on High School Graduation Rates

In an effort to boost graduation rates in the United States, especially for the low-income and minority students who typically graduate at rates close to 50 percent, **Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA)** and **Representative Bobby Scott (D-VA)** reintroduced the Every Student Counts Act (ESCA) on March 17.

“One of the greatest educational challenges we face is bringing down the dropout rate, especially for minorities and children with disabilities,” said Senator Harkin. “As children drop out, they face a lifetime of fewer opportunities and lower earnings. Economically, our nation cannot afford to lose one million students each year. Morally, we cannot allow children to continue to fall through the cracks. This legislation puts us on the right track towards turning back the tide of high school dropouts.”

The ESCA, which Harkin and Scott first introduced in the 110th Congress, would create a common graduation rate calculation and require states to report the graduation rates of student subgroups (race, ethnicity, income, etc.). It would also set a graduation rate goal of 90 percent for all students and disadvantaged populations. Schools, districts and states with graduation rates below 90 percent—either overall or for any student subgroup—would have to increase their graduation rates by an average of 3 percentage points per year to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

In order to balance testing and graduation rates for accountability purposes, the bill would ensure that test scores and graduation rates are weighted equally when determining AYP so that schools have balanced incentives to both graduate their students *and* raise their test scores. It would also give schools, districts, and states credit for students who take longer than the typical four years to earn a regular diploma. Such a provision creates incentives for schools, districts, and states to create programs to serve students who have already dropped out.

“The current high school accountability system is failing our students and our future as a nation,” Scott said. “Almost one-third of all high school students in the United States fail to graduate with their peers and the numbers are worse for minorities as compared to non-minority students. Nationally, almost half of black students do not graduate from high school and students with disabilities have the lowest four-year graduation rates in the nation. “It is my hope that with this bill, we can make great strides toward graduating more of America’s students and preparing them to succeed in college and the workforce.”

More information on the Every Student Counts Act, including a summary of the legislation, is available at http://www.all4ed.org/federal_policy/legislative_updates/ESCA.



RAISING GRADUATION RATES: New Report Examines National and State Progress Toward Increasing Graduation Rates

The national high school graduation rate remained essentially flat between 2002 and 2006, rising from 73.6 percent in 2002 to 74.0 percent in 2006, according to a new report from the Everyone Graduates Center, which is located in the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University. Although the national graduation rate was unchanged, the report, *Raising Graduation Rates: A Series of Data Briefs*, finds that eighteen states saw increases in their graduation rates during the time period, including twelve states where gains were substantial.

“There is wide variation across the states in the implementation of many key policy reforms advocated over the past decade,” write the report’s authors, **Robert Balfanz, co-director of the Everyone Graduates Center** and **Thomas C. West, senior research analyst at the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago**. “States that made improvements do not appear to share one common set of policies or practices, but all are implementing some key reforms.”

The twelve states with the most substantial increase in their graduation rate, as measured by the average freshman graduation rate, are shown in the table below.¹

State	Graduation Rate Gain (Percentage Points)	Graduation Rate (2002)	Graduation Rate (2006)	Net Gain in High School Graduates
Tennessee	11.2	61%	72%	8,000
Delaware	6.8	70%	76%	600
Kentucky	6.8	71%	78%	3,400
South Dakota	5.3	79%	85%	500
Arkansas	5.2	75%	80%	1,900
Alabama	4.1	62%	66%	2,300
North Carolina	3.6	68%	72%	3,900
New York	3.5	64%	67%	8,400
Hawaii	3.4	72%	76%	500
Missouri	3.4	78%	81%	2,500
Nebraska	3.1	84%	87%	700
New Hampshire	3.0	78%	81%	500
United States	0.4	74%	74%	40,400

The report also focuses on changes in the number of students who attend high schools with weak versus high promoting power.² It identifies Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, New York, and North Carolina as the states that made good gains in producing graduates and reducing the number of dropout factories within their borders. Although it acknowledges that an examination into why these states improved is beyond its scope, the report does find that these states did not implement a common set of policies or programs.

Indeed, the report finds wide variation across the states in terms of which reforms they implemented over the last decade. For example, the legal dropout age varies from sixteen to eighteen across the twelve states, the number of credits required for graduation ranges from twenty to twenty-four, and only four states require exams for graduation. It also notes that districts within these states differed widely in applying for and winning Small Learning Community (SLC) grants, which the report says is the major federal program that supported high school reform during the relevant time period. The report points out that three of the states with the most significant gains—Kentucky, North Carolina, and New York—also had the greatest number of schools that won SLC grants. The report also finds that Tennessee, Alabama, and New York were able to raise standards, increase accountability, and graduate more students—a finding which would appear to counter arguments that higher standards could lead to more dropouts.

Significant attention is devoted to Tennessee, which, as the report notes, “has not been on the national reform radar screen,” but produced the largest overall graduation rate increase and the

¹ The average freshman graduation rate is the number of on-time regular diploma recipients in a given year divided by the average number of eighth-grade students enrolled five years earlier, ninth graders enrolled four years earlier, and tenth graders enrolled three years earlier.

² In high schools with weak promoting power—also called “dropout factories”—there are 60 percent fewer seniors than freshmen three years earlier and high odds that graduation is not the norm. According to the report, these schools account for half or more of the nation’s dropouts. In high schools with high promoting power, 90 percent or more students progress in a timely fashion from ninth to twelfth grade.

second greatest number of additional graduates. The report gives partial credit for these increases to the fact that Tennessee saw a marked decline in the number of students earning special education diplomas and certificates of attendance from 2002 to 2006. It also points out that Memphis and Hamilton County, which adopted district-wide school reform efforts, saw substantial increases in their graduation rates.

Overall, in the case of Tennessee and the other eleven states, the report finds no direct correlation between particular programs or policy changes and higher graduation rates. Instead, it attributes the gains to multiple local and state efforts. “That the twelve states that made the most progress do not appear to have used a common set of practices and policies further points out that context matters and graduation rates are not improved through a single program or policy but, through a multiplicity of efforts at multiple levels within a state,” it reads. “At the same time, the fact that a dozen states did witness significant improvements signals that even when comprehensive efforts to improve graduation rates were not the norm, progress was possible.”

The Graduation Rate Challenge

Using data from the dozen states that made the most progress, as well as from the rest of the fifty states, Balfanz and West paint a picture of the scope, magnitude, and location of the challenges states and the nation face in meeting the call to graduate all students from high school prepared for college. Specifically:

- Each year, there are approximately 1.2 million ninth graders across the nation who likely need additional supports to graduate. Many of these students can be identified before they enter, or soon after they begin high school.
- Nationwide, about 250,000 students enrolled as seniors each year do not receive diplomas by the following summer. Some are only a few credits shy of graduation and represent both a “tragic loss and the potential for quick gains.”
- Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Wisconsin are within “striking distance” of achieving 90 percent graduation rates, but some of the other states with relatively high graduation rates have seen no progress since 1998.
- For the nation to meet its graduation rate challenge, significant improvements will need to continue or begin with the seventeen to twenty states with the greatest number of dropouts, the most intense combination of weak promoting power high schools, and/or fewer graduates than their share of high school students.
- As a whole, the nation made more progress in increasing the number of high schools with high promoting power (90 percent or more) than in decreasing the number of high schools with weak promoting power (60 percent or less).

Overall, the report says that the nation’s initial response to a graduation rate challenge was “not sufficient” because the nation as a whole did not move forward, and only one out of three states made measurable progress. “The good news is that the nation is responding,” the report reads. “The last few years have seen both an acceleration of efforts and the beginning of more comprehensive approaches. It has also become clear that the federal government needs to play a more active role.”

The complete report, as well as data on the level of recent progress for all fifty states, is available at <http://every1graduates.org/GradChallenge.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.