



# Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **PISA DAY: Ten National Education Organizations to Host Digital Event on Latest PISA Results on December 3**

On December 3, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) will release the latest results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a test of reading literacy,

mathematics, and science given every three years to fifteen-year-olds in the United States and more than sixty-five countries worldwide. In conjunction with the release of the PISA scores and the U.S. Department of Education's announcement of the U.S. results, the Alliance for Excellent Education, along with nine national education organizations, will host an extensive digital event that examines the results and their lessons for U.S. education policy.



The digital event will be streamed live at <http://PISADay.org> and will include

- an official announcement by **U.S. Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan** and **OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría** of the international results of the PISA with discussions of implications for U.S. education policy;
- a presentation by **Andreas Schleicher, Deputy Director for Education and Skills, and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary-General of the OECD**, containing in-depth findings from the report, including how the United States performed;
- the first public release of new reports related to United States's performance on the PISA, and the connections to college- and career-ready standards and deeper learning competencies;
- interviews with global education leaders; and
- reactions to and lessons learned from the results presented by the ten host national education organizations.

“The Alliance is excited to work with its partners, the U.S. Department of Education, and the OECD to host a first-of-its-kind PISA Day, an event that will bring together leading education thinkers, researchers, educators, and students to discuss improving teaching and learning,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “PISA Day is the start to an ongoing initiative that will look beyond the international rankings to learn how to improve assessments and education in the United States.”

The Alliance is partnering with Achieve, ACT, America Achieves, Asia Society, Business Roundtable, College Board, Council of Chief State School Officers, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and National Center on Education and the Economy to host the digital event on December 3.

“Often, the focus of the PISA data is on where the United States falls in the international rankings. On December 3, we will look beyond the rankings to examine what we can learn from high-performing nations, particularly on the use of assessments that measure deeper learning,” said Wise. “With every state now adopting college- and career-ready standards, the United States can learn from the PISA data how top-performing nations use high-quality assessments to boost student learning outcomes.”

Visit <http://PISADay.org> to register and ensure access to live video from the digital event, as well as to receive the latest updates and information. Also follow the action on Twitter using #OECDPISA.

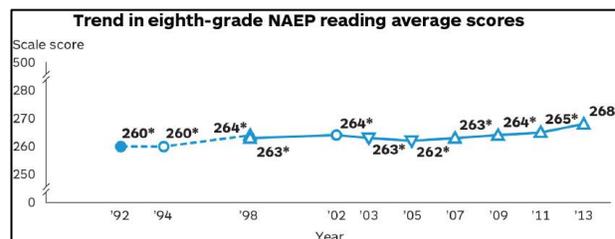


### **NATION’S REPORT CARD: Fourth- and Eighth-Grade Students Post Record Scores in Reading and Math, but Large Percentages Still Fall Short of Proficient Levels**

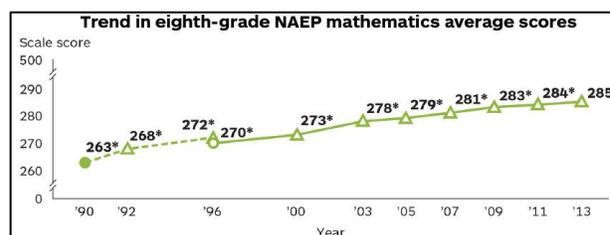
The reading and math results released on November 7 from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation’s Report Card, were cause for celebration and concern. On the bright side, the average reading and math scores posted by the nation’s fourth- and eighth-grade students were at an all-time high. At the same time, however, only 36 percent of the nation’s eighth-grade students scored at a “proficient” level in both reading and math. Similarly, only 35 percent (reading) and 42 percent (math) of fourth graders scored at the “proficient” level.

In his [official statement on the results](#), **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** opted for the middle ground, praising local leaders and educators for “raising standards and driving innovation” while saying that the report card provides “encouraging but modest signs of progress.”

As shown in the chart to the right, the average eighth-grade reading score was higher in 2013 than in all previous assessment years and increased by 3 points—the largest jump since 1998—compared to 2011. At the fourth-grade level, the average score was not significantly different from the all-time high posted in 2011.



In math, the average eighth-grade score was also higher than all previous assessment years and continues a steady increase that began in 2003. Among fourth graders, the 2013 average math score was also higher than in any other year.



Among students of color, both black and Hispanic eighth graders posted average reading scores that were higher than in any previous assessment year. Even with these gains, however, the achievement gaps between their scores and those of white students remain large. On average, the score posted by black eighth graders (250) was 26 points lower than that of white students (276). Meanwhile, the gap between Hispanic eighth graders’ average reading score and that of their white counterparts continued to narrow, falling from 25 points in 2007 to 21 points in 2013. Asians/Pacific Islanders posted the highest average reading score (280). The achievement gap between students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch and those who were not has remained at about 25 points since they were first measured in 2002.

**Average Eighth-Grade Reading Scores by Student Subgroup**

	2005	2007	2009	2011	2013
Asian/Pacific Islander	271	271	274	275	280
White	271	272	273	274	276
Hispanic	246	247	249	252	256
Amer. Indian/Alaskan Native	249	247	251	252	251
Black	243	245	246	249	250
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch–Not Eligible	270	271	273	275	278
Free/Reduced-Priced Lunch–Eligible	247	247	249	252	254

Duncan said it was “very troubling” that achievement gaps failed to narrow between 2011 and 2013 and noted that U.S. students are still “well behind” their peers from top-performing nations in math and reading.

“If America’s students are to remain competitive in a knowledge-based economy, our public schools must greatly accelerate the rate of progress of the last four years and do more to narrow America’s large achievement gaps,” Duncan said. “It is an urgent moral and economic imperative that our schools do a better job of preparing students for today’s globally competitive world.”

The complete results are available at [http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading\\_math\\_2013/](http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2013/).



**DIGITAL LEARNING DAY 2014: Alliance for Excellent Education Announces Key Partnerships for Nationwide Celebration of Innovative Teachers and Effective Applications of Digital Learning**

With less than three months until Digital Learning Day 2014, the Alliance for Excellent Education today announced a collaboration with the Library of Congress on the hosting, promotion, and content development for the Washington, DC–based national celebration on Wednesday, February 5, 2014. Digital



Learning Day recognizes innovative teaching and common-sense, effective applications of digital learning in America's schools that support teachers, improve learning, and help students achieve at their highest potential.

“The Library of Congress is well-known for being the largest library in the world, but it is also home to a vast array of digital resources for teachers and librarians, including lessons plans, primary sources, professional development materials, and more,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia.**

In addition to the national celebration, Digital Learning Day will extend well past the nation's capital with all fifty states; Washington, DC; and the Virgin Islands hosting statewide events and school-based activities to highlight and showcase the potential of digital learning in the nation's schools.

Hundreds of organizations and corporations have joined the effort, including new partnerships with the National Education Association and National Parent Teacher Association. “As more schools begin to introduce aspects of digital learning into their classrooms, teachers and parents must be highly engaged and deeply involved,” Wise said.

In preparation for Digital Learning Day, the Alliance and its partners will work together to develop additional Digital Learning Day content for parents, teachers and librarians in the form of toolkits, lesson plans, and video showcases in topics such as civics, language arts, social studies, and history.

“The Library of Congress—a leader in the promotion of lifelong learning through its unparalleled collections and primary source materials—is pleased to welcome Digital Learning Day 2014. We look forward to contributing to a program that explores how technology makes accessible previously untapped resources and enriches the learning experience for all,” said **Lee Ann Potter, director of education outreach for the Library of Congress.**

“The National Education Association and its more than 3 million members are proud to partner with the Alliance for Excellent Education on Digital Learning Day 2014,” said **NEA President Dennis Van Roekel.** “In today's classroom, a teacher's ability to connect with students has become much easier with the use of technology. There's no turning back. The appropriate use of technology in education will improve student learning, quality of instruction, and education employee effectiveness, and it will provide opportunities to eradicate education inequities.”

The current list of national core partners for 2014 is available at <http://digitallearningday.org/partners/alliance-partners/>.

The growing list of corporate partners for 2014, including AT&T and Intel, is available at <http://digitallearningday.org/partners/corporate-sponsors/>.

To learn more about Digital Learning Day, including cutting-edge school districts and schools, lessons, and videos of digital learning in practice, visit <http://www.DigitalLearningDay.org>.



## **A TIME FOR RENEWAL: U.S. Department of Education Announces “Streamlined” Process for Extending ESEA Waivers, Draws Criticism from Civil Rights Organizations**

On August 29, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) released guidance outlining how states could request a two-year renewal to extend their ED-granted waivers from certain requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). In a November 14 [letter to chief state school officers](#), however, **U.S. Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education Deborah S. Delisle** backed away from some of those requirements in favor of a more “streamlined” process that raised concern among civil rights organizations.

In announcing the changes, Delisle said that the new process would accomplish the goals and objectives in the original guidance while “reducing burden and allowing states to move forward with the hard work of implementing college- and career-ready standards, more effective accountability systems for all students, and teacher and principal evaluation and support systems.”

The decision to extend waivers, as well as the decision to relax the requirements to receive a waiver extension, drew strong criticism from **Wade Henderson, president and chief executive officer of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights**, who called the decision an “unconscionable retreat from a decades-long federal commitment to improving educational opportunities and outcomes.

“By capitulating to the demands of states—many of which have long and lamentable histories of segregation, inequality, fiscal inequity, and persistent failure to educate millions of children—[ED] has confirmed what many in the civil and human rights community feared all along: these ESEA waivers are less about students and more about alleviating adult responsibility to educate them,” [said Henderson](#).

Under the [original guidance released in August](#), a state seeking a waiver extension had to (1) describe how it will continue to meet the original requirements for receiving a waiver; (2) demonstrate that the waiver has been effective in enabling it to carry out the activities for which the waiver was requested; (3) show that the waiver has contributed to improved student achievement; and (4) explain how an extension is in the public’s best interest.

Additionally, in response to concerns raised by the Alliance and civil rights organizations, the original guidance also required states to provide interventions and support for low-achieving students in Title I schools when one or more subgroups miss graduation rate goals or annual targets over a number of years. The degree to which ED will hold states to this policy under the revised guidelines is much less certain.

The original renewal guidance also added requirements to strengthen teaching. Specifically, states had to describe how they would strengthen their use of federal funds for professional development (i.e., Title II, Part A funding) and develop plans for the use of effectiveness data from teacher and principal evaluation systems to ensure that low-income students and students of color are not taught by inexperienced, ineffective, or out-of-field teachers at higher rates than other students.

In the letter, Delisle said that the equitable distribution of effective teachers remains a “very high priority” but will be addressed as part of a “fifty-state strategy,” rather than as part of the ESEA flexibility process.

Instead of the specific requirements outlined in the original guidance, the streamlined process asks states to submit waiver renewal requests based on feedback they will receive from ED on monitoring reports. Under the revised guidance, a state seeking a waiver extension is required to (1) submit a letter to ED requesting an extension and describing how ESEA flexibility has been effective in enabling the state to carry out the activities for which the flexibility was requested and how the flexibility has contributed to improved student achievement; and (2) resolve any state-specific issues and “next steps” identified as a result of ED’s monitoring, as well as other outstanding issues related to ESEA flexibility.

Although some observers have said that the new streamlined process makes it highly unlikely that a state would lose its waiver, **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** was of a different mind at a November 15 Council of Chief State School Officers’s meeting in Richmond, Virginia.

“I’m sure someone will say that what we did means that we won’t pull a waiver,” Duncan told the attendees, as reported by [Education Week’s Politics K–12 blog](#). “I want to be really clear that the odds are that we will revoke a waiver or two or three, and that could happen as early as this summer ... I just want to be really up front and honest about that.”



### **PUBLIC PARCC: Common Core State Standards Assessment Consortium Releases New Sample Test Items**

Forty-six states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which spell out what students should know and be able to do at each grade level. Two consortia of states, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, are developing assessments that are intended to measure student performance against the CCSS.

On November 6, PARCC released new sample test items, making public exemplar test items across the grades in both mathematics and English language arts in an effort to provide information about the assessment system and support educators as they transition to the CCSS and the PARCC tests. Schools are scheduled to field-test the assessments in spring 2014 and roll them out formally in the 2014–15 school year.

“As a teacher, I am extremely impressed with the sample items released by PARCC,” [said Amy Spies, Florida PARCC Educator Leader Cadre member and middle school teacher](#). “These rich questions and authentic student tasks get to the heart of the standards and will give us more insight into student reasoning and understanding than current standardized tests.”

Later this year, PARCC will make all of its sample items available on the PARCC technology platform, providing an opportunity for students and teachers to try out the assessment system in the manner in which it will be administered.

While the consortia have worked to develop these new assessments, the Alliance has hosted a series of webinars updating their progress and enabling leaders from the consortia to share

information and respond to questions from the public. Archived video from these webinars is available via the links below:

- [April 4, 2011](#): The consortia’s leaders lay out their designs and plans for the assessments.
- [September 13, 2011](#): The consortia discussed their efforts to help districts and states implement the CCSS and make the transition to the new assessments.
- [March 1, 2012](#): An examination of the consortia’s content frameworks and technology plans.
- [October 2, 2012](#): A discussion of the consortia’s efforts to engage educators to prepare them for the new assessments.
- [August 29, 2013](#): An update on the consortia’s progress and a discussion of challenges they face as they near the 2014–15 school year.

All of PARCC’s sample test items are available at <http://www.parcconline.org/samples/item-task-prototypes>.

### **U.S. Department of Education Announces Highest-Rated Applications for Investing in Innovation 2013 Competition**

On November 8, the U.S. Department of Education announced the twenty-five highest-rated applications received as part of the fourth round of the Investing in Innovation (i3) grant competition, which will award more than \$135 million to expand innovative practices designed to improve student achievement. To receive federal funding under the program, these potential grantees must secure private sector matching funds by December 11, 2013.

“In this era of rapid change, we must make sure that our students are keeping pace with the rigor, relevance, and changing demands of the global job market,” said **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan**. “I am encouraged by the innovative ideas to accelerate student achievement demonstrated in these applications.”

Among the issues addressed in the twenty-five applications are programs for training parents and families in the skills and strategies that support their children’s educational growth and redesigning science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) course content and instructional practices to engage students and increase their academic achievement.

Thirteen states—Alabama, Arizona, California, Georgia, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Utah—and the District of Columbia were represented among the twenty-five highest-rated applications.

More information on the i3 grant competition and the list of twenty-five highest-rated applications are available at <http://1.usa.gov/1acp37S>.

***Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress*** is a free biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events 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. Contributors include Jason Amos, editor; Cyndi Waite; and Kate Bradley.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a Washington, DC–based national policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. For more information, visit [www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org). Follow the Alliance on Twitter ([www.twitter.com/all4ed](http://www.twitter.com/all4ed)), Facebook ([www.facebook.com/all4ed](http://www.facebook.com/all4ed)), and the Alliance’s “High School Soup” blog ([www.all4ed.org/blog](http://www.all4ed.org/blog)).