



ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



ANOTHER SLICE OF PISA: Alliance's "PISA Day" Coverage Draws More than 70,000 Individuals Worldwide; Archived Video Available

On December 3, 2013, the Alliance for Excellent Education and its partners hosted PISA Day to explore the latest results from the 2012 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 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).



While many focused on where American fifteen-year-olds ranked in reading (seventeenth), science (twentieth), and mathematics (twenty-seventh) among the thirty-four countries of the OECD, PISA Day looked beyond the international rankings to the lessons that can be learned from PISA. PISA Day activities included:

- 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 for the United States from the report](#);
- a **panel discussion with foreign exchange high school students** moderated by **Amanda Ripley**, author of the bestselling *The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way*; and
- the release of a new Alliance report, [The Deepest Learners: What PISA Can Reveal About the Learning that Matters](#), which uses PISA results to reveal that the United States struggles to produce top performers in reading, math, and science at the rates of its international peers; and
- discussions with national education leaders on the implications of the PISA results for policy, teaching, and economic growth.

More than 70,000 individuals watched the live video stream of PISA Day—part of which was used by NBC Nightly News in its report on the PISA results, "[US Teens Lag in Global](#)

[Education Rankings as Asian Countries Rise to the Top.](#)” If you missed any of PISA Day, archived video, which includes Mr. Schleicher’s PowerPoint, is available at PISADay.org.



WHERE HAVE ALL THE TOP PERFORMERS GONE?: With Common Core and Aligned Assessments, United States Taking Action to Improve Future PISA Results, Wise Writes

While the U.S. rankings in mathematics, reading, and science on the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have drawn the most attention, **Alliance President Bob Wise**, writing a response for *National Journal*’s “Education Insiders” blog, points out another disturbing PISA trend: the declining proportion of American students who score at PISA’s top level.

Wise notes that only 8.8 percent of U.S. fifteen-year-olds performed at the top levels in mathematics, compared with 10.1 percent in 2003; 7.9 percent performed at the top levels in reading, compared with 12.2 percent in 2000; and 7.5 percent performed at top levels in science, down from 9.1 percent in 2006 (that decline is not statistically significant).

By contrast, several high-performing nations had far higher proportions of students at the top levels, and many increased the proportions scoring high over time. Shanghai-China had far and away the most, with 55.4 percent of their students scoring at top levels in mathematics, 25.1 percent in reading, and 27.2 percent in science. Singapore, Korea, Japan, Canada, and Switzerland, among other nations, all had considerably more students at the top levels than the United States. Poland’s proportion of top performers rose substantially, from 10.1 percent to 16.7 percent in mathematics and 5.9 percent to 10 percent in reading.

“The fact that so few U.S. students reached top levels—and that the number who have done so is dropping—is worrisome,” Wise writes. “These levels indicate that students can use their knowledge to think critically, solve complex and novel problems, and communicate effectively—precisely the deeper learning competencies that are essential for their future.”

Wise notes that the United States did not need many students with these abilities to keep its economy humming in the past, but that is no longer true. He cites a [recent commentary on the PISA results](#) by *Washington Post* columnist **Fareed Zakaria**.

“It’s possible that the top 1 percent will continue generating enough growth to keep the country moving, but it’s more likely that the weight of a stagnant middle class will eventually slow the economy,” Zakaria writes. “More important, the politics of a country with a tiny productive elite and a massive underclass with low skills, depressed wages, and no prospects will not look pretty.”

Wise points to several positive steps the United States is taking that could improve its performance in the next round of PISA exams in 2015, including implementing the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics, which have been adopted by forty-six states and the District of Columbia, and the new assessments aligned with them.

“The challenge for the United States is to implement these standards and assessments well so that all teachers are capable of teaching those abilities effectively, and all students have the support they need to learn them,” Wise writes. “Improving PISA performance, and more importantly, improving the nation’s civic and economic strength, depends on whether the nation can meet that challenge.”

Wise’s complete response is available at <http://bit.ly/1eaT9NX>.



A CHRISTMAS MIRACLE: Murray and Ryan Announce Bipartisan Agreement to Restart Appropriations Work, Avoid Another Government Shutdown in January

On December 10, **Senate Budget Committee Chairwoman Patty Murray (D-WA)** and **House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-WI)** announced a deal to restart work on the twelve Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 appropriations bills that have been held hostage by partisan gridlock. The agreement sets overall spending levels for FY 2014, which began on October 1, and FY 2015, while also providing significant relief from the sequester cuts that have reduced funding for a broad array of federal programs, including education programs Impact Aid and Head Start.

“This agreement breaks through the recent dysfunction to prevent another government shutdown and roll back sequestration’s cuts to defense and domestic investments in a balanced way,” [said Murray](#). “It’s a good step in the right direction that can hopefully rebuild some trust and serve as a foundation for continued bipartisan work.”

“We are generally pleased,” **Joel Packer, executive director of the Committee for Education Funding**, told [Inside Higher Ed](#). “While not what we ideally hoped for, which was a complete replacement of the entire sequester for the remaining eight years, this deal does stop the cuts [and provides] a funding level that stops moving investments in education backward but instead turns the corner so we can start catching up to where we were.”

The agreement has already received approval from the House, which passed the measure by a vote of 332 to 94 on December 12. The Senate will consider the measure later this week.

After the House vote, Ryan released a [statement](#) thanking his colleagues from both political parties for supporting the measure.

“It reduces the deficit—without raising taxes,” Ryan said. “And it does so by cutting spending in a smarter way. It doesn’t go as far as I’d like, but it’s a firm step in the right direction. This agreement will stop Washington’s lurch from crisis to crisis. It will bring stability to the budget process and show both parties can work together.”

Should the Senate pass the measure, **Senate Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Barbara Mikulski (D-MD)** and **House Appropriations Committee Chairman Harold Rogers (R-KY)** will begin negotiations on how to divide the \$1.012 trillion among the twelve appropriations bills. After those decisions are made, House and Senate appropriators will begin writing the individual spending bills over the holiday recess.

Floor action on those bills, which could be combined into a single omnibus bill or a series of mini-omnibus bills, would most likely occur in early January after both chambers return from the holiday recess, but they would need to be completed before January 15, the expiration date of the continuing resolution that is currently funding the government. Only after those bills are passed will educators and advocates have a clear understanding of funding levels for education programs in FY 2014.



GOT MOOC?: Registration Underway for Free Massive Open Online Course on Planning for the Digital Learning Transition

Beginning January 20, the Alliance and the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University will run a new version of the Planning for the Digital Learning Transition in K–12 Schools massive open online course for educators (DLT MOOC-Ed). Building on the Alliance’s Project 24 initiative, the course will help K–12 educators plan and implement digital learning initiatives that enable their schools and districts to meet educational challenges. Available at no cost, the course will run from January 20 through March 16.

“Students and educators are facing new challenges, including higher expectations for student learning that are associated with new college- and career-ready standards,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance and former governor of West Virginia**. “This MOOC-Ed will allow educators to experience first-hand how digital learning can change teaching and help students meet these higher standards. It will also help them develop a valuable plan for how to navigate their school or district through a digital learning transition.”

The DLT MOOC-Ed is designed for school and district leaders, such as superintendents, principals, curriculum directors, technology directors, financial officers, principals, instructional coaches, library media specialists, and lead teachers, as well as university faculty, consultants, parents, and others involved in planning and implementing K–12 digital learning initiatives.

And while course materials focus on the United States, educators from around the world are welcome and have enriched the experience for everyone in prior versions of the course. The two previous versions of the MOOC-Ed have drawn participation from more than 4,400 individuals. Below are a few comments from previous participants:

- “No matter the issue I was thinking about or planning to work on, someone had a suggestion or was already working on a similar area. The dialogue and resources were timely and thought provoking as well as helpful.”
- “Sharing resources, plans, pitfalls, and celebrations of folks from so many different economic and sociological backgrounds really helped one feel ‘We are not in this alone’ and gave me the inspiration to push administration for more tech-focused professional development.”

The new version of the DLT MOOC-Ed builds upon lessons learned and feedback from the first two versions. Part one of the new MOOC-Ed will focus on the big picture of envisioning the future of schools, changing the culture of teaching and learning, and implementing digital learning transitions in exemplary schools and districts. Part two focuses on addressing

professional development, technology infrastructure, community engagement, use of data, and other elements of successful DLT plans.

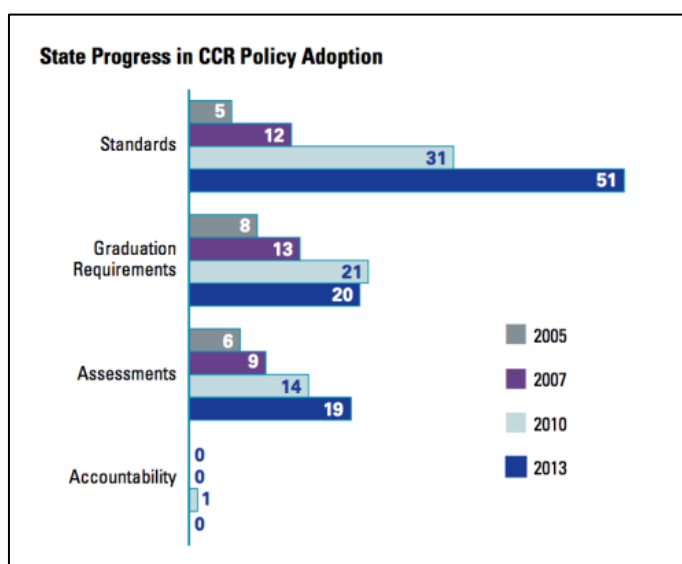
The Alliance recommends, when possible, participation by teams from schools, districts, or other organizations; having local colleagues work together to relate the DLT MOOC-Ed lessons to their own context makes the course even more valuable. If a team is not available, individuals are welcome to participate on their own.

Registration is now open at <https://courses.mooc-ed.org/dlt3>.



CLOSING THE EXPECTATIONS GAP: Transitioning State Policies and Practices to Prepare All Students for College and a Career

A new report from Achieve finds that states have made “tremendous” progress in adopting academic standards aligned with college and career readiness, but less progress in state policy and practice around high school graduation rates. The eighth annual report, *Closing the Expectations Gap: 2013 Annual Report on the Alignment of State K–12 Policies and Practice with the Demands of College and Careers*, also examines progress on assessments and accountability systems and contains findings based on Achieve’s fifty-state survey.



“All fifty states deserve credit for confronting the expectations gap—that is the gap between what it takes to earn a high school diploma and what the real world actually expects graduates to know and be able to do,” said **Mike Cohen, Achieve’s president**. “But raising standards is just the start. Supporting teachers and leaders with the time and tools they need to change classroom practice is critical, and many states are doing just that. It is also important to align graduation requirements, assessments, and accountability policies to college- and career-ready standards.”

Since 2005, when the first *Closing the Expectations Gap* report was released, all fifty states and the District of Columbia have adopted some form of college- and career-ready (CCR) standards in English language arts and mathematics, whether the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or, as in the case of Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia, their own state-developed standards that reflect college- and career-ready expectations and have been verified by state postsecondary institutions.

The report notes that nearly all states plan to fully implement these higher standards by 2014–15, but they could face challenges in ensuring that educators have the support necessary to improve their instruction so that all students receive effective instruction on the full set of CCR standards.

While states have moved ahead in adopting CCR standards, they have slipped slightly in graduation requirements. According to the report, only nineteen states and the District of Columbia, down from twenty-one in 2010, require students to complete a course of study aligned with state-adopted CCR standards. Furthermore, only half of states have elevated their graduation requirements to match the newly adopted CCR standards. This misalignment means that students may have the opportunity to take courses designed to prepare them for college and a career but are not required to do so, nor will they be assessed on their mastery of the CCR standards, a loophole that will likely leave some students unprepared for the rigors of college and a career.

The report suggests that states review the “alignment among their graduation requirements, CCSS/CCR standards and high school assessments,” and encourages states to require students to meet CCR-aligned graduation requirements that are rigorous and consistent throughout the state.

Nineteen states are in a position to administer assessments aligned with CCR standards that can be used by colleges and universities to make enrollment decisions, and five states have developed assessments aligned with their state standards. That leaves fourteen states that still require students to take a college admissions test, like the ACT or SAT. The report notes that while most states are on track to implement assessments aligned with CCR standards, policymakers must resist recent financial and political pressure to abandon or delay plans to do so.

The report recommends that state leaders become advocates for high-quality assessments that support and reinforce rigorous standards, as well as openly inform students and the public the purpose of the tests and their importance for ensuring college and career readiness.

Little progress was made in the last year on states developing comprehensive accountability systems. Achieve’s four key components to a successful accountability system are (1) setting goals for improving college and career readiness for all students; (2) reporting CCR results to parents and the public; (3) incentivizing schools and districts to improve student performance; and (4) differentiating and classifying schools based on the CCR student results. No state has currently developed and/or implemented an accountability system with all four components. However, thirty-five states have incorporated at least one of the aforementioned measures of accountability into their existing systems, an improvement of three states since last year.

Two key components of transitioning state policy and practices to systems that ensure students are ready for college and a career are (1) preparing teachers to teach to CCR standards and next-generation assessments and (2) providing additional supports for students to meet the higher standards. The report recommends that states leverage every opportunity for collaborative professional learning and development around the new CCR standards.

States should also seek to provide additional interventions and supports for struggling students to ensure they catch up and succeed under the CCR standards, the report finds, and notes that expanded learning time for the students who need additional assistance is one practice that is showing great potential.

Overall, the report finds that states need to take a comprehensive, strategic approach to incorporating all four areas—standards, graduation requirements, assessments, and accountability—into a cohesive education system that prioritizes students’ readiness for college and a career. Significant improvement should be made in all four core areas, especially in the area that showed the least progress—developing and implementing accountability systems.

“This work is complicated and it will take time to get it right,” said Cohen. “Governors, chiefs, and other state and districts leaders must continue to make the work a top priority; they deserve tremendous credit for leading on an issue that is so critical to the future of students, their families, communities, states, and ultimately our country.”

The complete report is available at

<http://www.achieve.org/files/2013ClosingtheExpectationsGapReport.pdf>.

	<p style="text-align: center;">Happy Holidays from the Alliance for Excellent Education!</p> <p>The Alliance for Excellent Education wishes you and yours a happy holiday season and best wishes for the new year!</p> <p>This is the last issue before the Alliance newsletter—although not the Alliance staff—settles in for a short winter’s nap. The next issue of <i>Straight A’s</i> will be January 20, 2014. In the meantime, follow the Alliance on Twitter, like the Alliance on Facebook, and visit the Alliance’s “High School Soup” blog for the latest education news and events.</p>
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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. Follow the Alliance on Twitter ([www.twitter.com/all4ed](https://twitter.com/all4ed)), Facebook (www.facebook.com/all4ed), and the Alliance’s “High School Soup” blog (www.all4ed.org/blog).