



# StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **CONNECTED LEARNING: Alliance Report Examines How New Learning Approach Uses Digital Media to “Connect” Students to Interests**

A new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education introduces connected learning, a promising educational approach supported by the MacArthur Foundation and the Digital Learning Media (DLM) initiative that schools and out-of-school sites are adopting to enhance student learning and outcomes by connecting their education to their interests. Connected learning uses digital media to engage students' interests and instill deeper learning skills, such as communication, collaboration, and critical thinking. The report, *Connected Learning: Harnessing the Information Age to Make Learning More Powerful*, lists four elements constituting connected learning's emphasis on bridging school, popular culture, home, and the community to create an environment in which students engage in and take responsibility for their learning.



“In today’s digital age and global economy, students need skills that cannot be learned by highlighting facts in a textbook or filling in blanks on a worksheet. Connected learning leverages students’ interests to master core academic concepts and deeper learning skills, while equipping them with a lifelong interest in learning,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Connected learning puts students in the driver’s seat of their own education vehicle.”

The report identifies four key facets of the connected learning approach. First, learners are the focus. By connecting a student’s interests to academic studies, civic engagement, and career opportunities, student engagement increases, and learning outcomes improve. For example, Quest to Learn, an innovative school in New York, has worked with video game developers to create games aligned with academic content. By focusing on the students and connecting their interest in playing video games and mastering levels to their academic achievement, Quest to Learn is incorporating the connected learning approach to help students succeed.

Next, students are supported by mentors and peers through the use of technology. In the twenty-first century, technology can easily connect students with like-minded peers around the state, region, country, and world with similar interests, as well as experts and mentors in students’ interest areas. The report notes that connected learning is not the use of a specific platform or digital tool; rather, it “seeks to design experiences for learners that take advantage of today’s abundant learning opportunities,” many of which are available through the power of technology.

Thirdly, connected learning takes place any time and anywhere—at home, school, and in the community. Social media, web-based communities, online platforms, and digital tools all offer students the opportunity to work during non-school hours.

Finally, students become “makers and producers,” meaning they are tasked with creating, producing, and designing end products, a process that allows students to take ownership and responsibility over their work. Consider YOUmedia, a network of libraries, museums, and other after school sites throughout the country, where students have access to digital media specialists and use digital technology to enhance their learning.

As *Connected Learning* describes, in a connected learning environment, teachers become designers and creators who aid students in connecting their personal interests to academics and deeper learning skills. Teachers in a connected learning environment prepare students for success in a career and life by equipping them with the know-how to turn their interests into academic excellence and a career. Quest to Learn and YOUmedia are just two examples of in- and out-of-school learning environments that are adopting and implementing the connected learning approach.

“Connected learning encourages students to develop and nourish their interests in a way that sets them up for academic success through increased engagement, prepares them for college and a career, and encourages innovation.” said Wise.

The report is available online at <http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/connected-learning/>.



#### **DISTRESSING DATA: U.S. Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection Reveals Educational Disparities Beginning as Early as Preschool**

During a March 21 event at J.O. Wilson Elementary School in Washington, DC, **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** and **U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder** released new data from the U.S. Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) revealing wide disparities in the educational experiences of Asian American and white students compared to other students of color. Specifically, the CRDC finds gaps in access to college-prep courses and significant differences in high school retention, school suspensions and expulsion rates, and teacher salaries. For the first time, the CRDC includes data on preschool suspensions and expulsions and reports disturbing racial disparities among four-year-old children.

According to the CRDC, only 50 percent of U.S. high schools offer calculus and only 63 percent offer physics; between 10–25 percent of high schools do not offer more than one of the core courses in the typical sequence of high school math and science education, including Algebra I and II, geometry, biology, and chemistry.

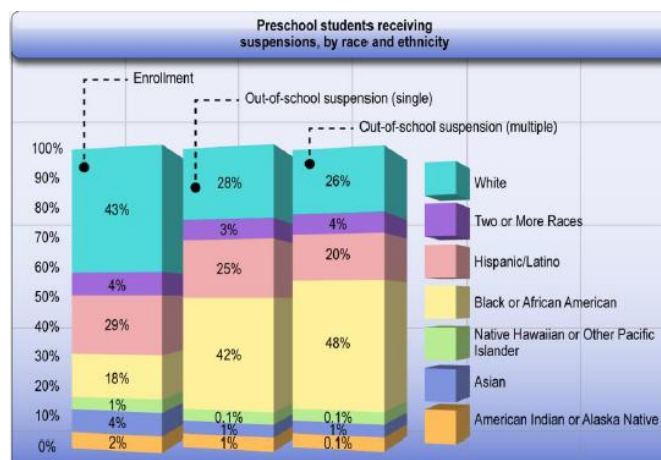
“In many cases, lack of access to these classes means students cannot even take the required classes they need to apply to four-year colleges,” Duncan said. “This dumming down of expectations is devastating to families, communities, and ultimately to our nation. We can’t continue to relegate terrific talent and potential to the sidelines.”

Although the lack of access to high-level math and science courses affects many high school students nationwide, the CRDC data shows that this lack of access disproportionately impacts students of color. For example, 25 percent of high schools with the highest percentages of black and Latino students do not offer Algebra II and approximately 33 percent do not offer chemistry. Fewer than half of American Indian and Native Alaskan high school students have access to the full range of math and science courses, compared to 81 percent of Asian American and 71 percent of white high school students. Black students (57 percent), Latino students (67 percent), students with disabilities (63 percent), and English language learners (ELLs) (65 percent) also have diminished access to the full range of courses.

The CRDC data also reveals wide gaps in course availability by state. In Montana, Arkansas, and Wyoming, for example, more than 95 percent of all high schools offer Algebra II, compared to only 56 percent of high schools in Georgia and Alaska and 62 percent of high schools in California.

The CRDC data also demonstrates higher rates of retention in high school for black students, ELLs, and students with disabilities than their white peers. For example, 12 percent of black students are held back in the ninth grade—double the rate of all other students (6 percent) and much higher than Asian (2 percent) and white (4 percent) students. And while students with disabilities and ELLs make up 12 percent and 5 percent, respectively, of high school students, they account for 19 percent and 11 percent of all students held back or retained a year.

As part of its data on school discipline, the CRDC finds disproportionately high suspension and expulsion rates for students of color that begins as early as preschool. As shown in the graph to the right, black children represent 18 percent of preschool enrollment, but they account for 42 percent of preschool students who are suspended once and 48 percent of preschool students who receive more than one out-of-school suspension. By comparison, white students represent 43 percent of preschool enrollment, but only 26 percent of preschool children who receive more than one out-of-school suspension.



“I simply cannot understand how our public preschool programs could suspend nearly 5,000 young children in a single year—and suspend over 2,500 children more than once,” Duncan said. “The fact that the school-to-prison pipeline appears to start as early as four years old—before kindergarten—should horrify us. We must do better—now!”

Holder focused his remarks on the importance of effective school discipline policies that foster safe, inclusive, and positive learning environments while keeping students in school. He referenced the Obama administration’s [new recommendations on classroom discipline](#) that are designed to end disparities in how students of different races are punished for violating school

rules and the president's [My Brother's Keeper initiative](#), which helps boys and young men of color stay in school and find good jobs.

"A routine school discipline infraction should land a student in a principal's office, not in a police precinct," Holder said.

In addition to the findings above, the CRDC also identifies limited preschool access in much of the country, a dearth of college counselors—one in five high schools nationwide lacks a school counselor—and teacher salary disparities between schools with the highest and lowest black and Latino student enrollments.

"[The CRDC] paints a stark portrait of inequity in opportunity in America that is educationally unsound, morally bankrupt, and economically self-destructive to our nation's best interest—this must compel us to act," Duncan said.

Two specific actions that Duncan mentioned were (1) President Obama's Preschool for All proposal, which would help states provide universal access to high-quality preschool to all four-year-old children from low- and moderate-income families, and (2) the new \$300 million Race to the Top–Equity and Opportunity fund that Obama included in his Fiscal Year 2015 budget proposal to complement ED's existing efforts to ensure equal opportunities for all students by "supporting and spotlighting state and district efforts to aggressively tackle achievement and opportunity gaps."

Since 1968, the CRDC has collected data on key education and civil rights issues in the nation's public schools to focus the U.S. Department of Education's equity efforts and monitor the effectiveness of its programs. The data released last week comes from the CRDC's 2011–12 collection, which includes data on every public school in the nation for the first time since 2000. In total, the collection includes information on approximately 16,500 school districts, 97,000 schools, and 49 million students.

"Let me be crystal clear," Duncan said. "[These] numbers ... are not projections. They are not estimates of educational opportunities in our nation's public schools. They present the first, detailed nationwide picture of the opportunity gap in America's schools."

As part of the data release, ED's Office for Civil Rights created new snapshots with detailed findings from the CRDC in four areas: early childhood education; school discipline, restraint, and seclusion; college and career readiness; and teacher and counselor equity. The snapshots are available at <http://www.ed.gov/blog/2014/03/four-new-civil-rights-data-collection-snapshots/>.



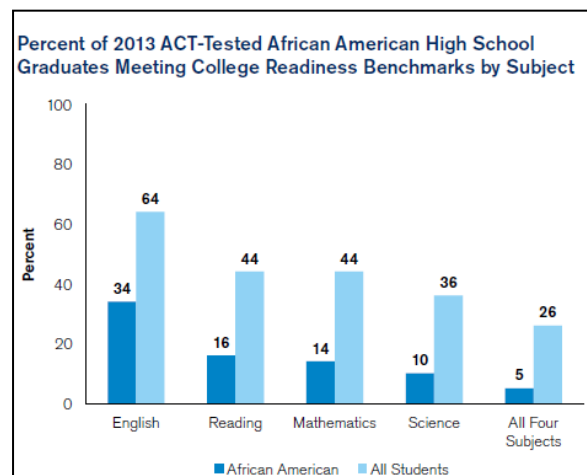
**THE CONDITION OF COLLEGE & CAREER READINESS: Only 5 Percent of African American High School Graduates "College Ready" in All Four of ACT's College-Readiness Benchmarks**

Only 5 percent of African American high school students from the Class of 2013 met all four of ACT's college-readiness benchmarks in English, reading, mathematics, and science, compared to 26 percent of the class as a whole, according to *The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2013: African American Students*, released by ACT on March 27.

“ACT’s report unequivocally documents the failure of our schools to prepare all African American students for college and career,” said **Michael Lomax, president and chief executive officer of the United Negro College Fund**. “This report should serve to focus our collective attention on the work we must do as a nation to ensure that all Americans are prepared to meet the basic requirements for postsecondary education; it’s a call to action we dare not ignore.”

As shown in the graph to the right, only 34 percent of African American graduates reached ACT’s college readiness benchmark in English, compared to 64 percent for all ACT-tested graduates. Similar achievement gaps are present in reading, mathematics, and science.

Only 10 percent of African American graduates met at least three of four benchmarks—compared to 39 percent for all ACT-tested graduates; 62 percent of African American graduates met none of the benchmarks, compared to 31 percent for all test takers.



Compared to 2012, the percentage of 2013 African American graduates meeting the benchmark dropped from 36 percent to 34 percent in English, 22 percent to 16 percent in reading, and 15 percent to 14 percent in mathematics; in science, the percentage meeting the benchmark increased from 7 percent in 2012 to 10 percent in 2013.

The decrease in the percentages of students reaching the subject-area benchmarks could be attributed to the increase in test takers. In 2013, 222,000 African American graduates took the ACT, an increase of 8.1 percent compared to 2012 and an increase of 22.5 percent since 2009.

The report is available at <http://www.act.org/newsroom/data/2013/states/africanamerican.html>.



## **POLL POSITION: African American and Hispanic Voters Most Likely to Support Common Core State Standards, According to New Poll**

African American voters and Hispanic voters are more likely to support the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) than any other demographic group, according to results from a new national poll by the Collaborative for Student Success released on March 24. Overall, 38 percent of all voters support the CCSS, compared to 27 percent who oppose and 36 percent who are not sure. Support rises to 64 percent, however, when poll participants are read a one-sentence description<sup>1</sup> about the CCSS while 24 percent continue to oppose and 12 percent are unsure.

According to the poll results, 51 percent of African American voters and 48 percent of Hispanic voters support the CCSS while only 14 percent and 29 percent, respectively, oppose the

<sup>1</sup> The sentence describing the CCSS reads, “To ensure that all students are prepared for success after graduation, the Common Core Standards establish a set of clear, consistent guidelines for what students should know and be able to do at each grade level across subjects.”



standards; 35 percent of African Americans and 23 percent of Hispanics were unsure. When read a one-sentence description of the CCSS, support among African-American and Hispanic voters increases to 81 percent and 68 percent, respectively.

The poll included an oversampling of voters in five states—Ohio, Florida, Michigan, Illinois, and Colorado—and provides detailed information on voters’ opinions in those states on several aspects of the CCSS.

During the course of the poll, voters in those five states were read three items or ideas included in the CCSS and asked whether they favored or opposed that particular one. For example, 83 percent of voters favor the idea that the CCSS “emphasized real understanding of mathematical concepts—not just memorization,” compared to 12 percent who are unopposed and 5 percent who are unsure.

Voters in those five states were also read a list of nine statements that people have made about the CCSS and asked whether it would make them more or less likely to support the CCSS. The highest polling statement was that “better educated students will lead to better employment opportunities for everyone and a better economy in the future,” which is supported by more than 80 percent of voters in all five states.

Voters in the five oversampled states were also asked whether they would be more or less likely to support a candidate for public office who supported the use of CCSS in their area. Results captured in the table below show that support increases from roughly 37 percent when first asked about the CCSS at the beginning of the poll to nearly 70 percent in all five states at the end of the poll after hearing all of the statements and ideas about the CCSS.

		Support	Unsure	Oppose
Ohio	1 <sup>st</sup>	36%	36%	28%
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	67%	10%	23%
Florida	1 <sup>st</sup>	37%	38%	25%
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	71%	10%	19%
Michigan	1 <sup>st</sup>	39%	38%	23%
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	70%	11%	19%
Illinois	1 <sup>st</sup>	40%	38%	22%
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	71%	8%	21%
Colorado	1 <sup>st</sup>	40%	34%	26%
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	67%	10%	23%

“When Americans hear accurate, straightforward information about the Common Core standards, they overwhelmingly support them because they recognize higher standards are an important part of helping kids succeed in college and in their careers,” said **Karen Nussle, executive director of the Collaborative for Student Success.**

The poll was conducted jointly by the Tarrance Group, a republican firm, and David Binder Research, a democratic firm, from January 27 through February 9, 2014 and included 1,000 voters nationwide, plus additional voters in Michigan, Florida, Colorado, Ohio, and Illinois.

Complete poll results are available at

[http://forstudentsuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/3-20-PPT\\_National-partners.pptx](http://forstudentsuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/3-20-PPT_National-partners.pptx).



## **COMMON CORE NO MORE?: Indiana Governor Signs Law Removing State From Common Core State Standards**

On March 24, Indiana became the first state to pull out of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) when **Governor Mike Pence (R)** signed a law requiring the state to adopt its own academic standards. Even with Indiana's withdrawal, forty-five states, representing more than 85 percent of all U.S. students, have adopted the CCSS.

"I believe our students are best served when decisions about education are made at the state and local level," [Pence said](#). "By signing this legislation, Indiana has taken an important step forward in developing academic standards that are written by Hoosiers, for Hoosiers, and are uncommonly high, and I commend members of the General Assembly for their support."

*Education Week* reporter **Andrew Ujifusa**, who has been following the CCSS very closely through his ["State EdWatch" blog](#), notes that the CCSS will not necessarily disappear from Indiana's schools.

"[Indiana] is in the process of drafting and reviewing new standards in English/language arts and math to 'replace' the common core," [he writes](#). "But these standards that are under development are based in part on ... you guessed it, the common core. These new standards will be a combination of the common core as well as previous content standards that the state has developed and used in classrooms."

Ujifusa writes that **Indiana State Superintendent Glenda Ritz** has the understanding that the CCSS would continue to be a part of the Indiana's content standards going forward. He notes that the new standards are on schedule to be adopted in a little more than a month.

Read Ujifusa's complete article at <http://bit.ly/1hqVzaF>.

***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](https://twitter.com/all4ed)), Facebook ([www.facebook.com/all4ed](https://www.facebook.com/all4ed)), and the Alliance's "High School Soup" blog ([www.all4ed.org/blog](http://www.all4ed.org/blog)).