



StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



GET CONNECTED: Obama Announces Winners of \$107 Million in Federal Grants to Better Prepare High School Students for Today's In-Demand Jobs

On April 7, President Obama announced twenty-four winners of \$107 million in federal grants that reward school districts for integrating real-life work experience into academic curriculum. The grants, which range from \$2.2 million to \$7 million, fall under the Obama administration's Youth CareerConnect program, an investment that the president believes will prepare today's students for the "in-demand jobs of the future."



"We challenged America's high schools ... [and asked], 'What can you do to make sure your students learn the skills that businesses are looking for in high-demand fields?'," Obama said. "And we asked high schools to develop partnerships with colleges and employers, and create classes that focus on real-life applications for the fields of the future—fields like science and technology and engineering and math. And part of the reason we have to do this now is because other countries, they've got a little bit of a lead on us on some of these areas."

The White House describes the program as a national competition administered by the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Labor, to "start redesigning America's high schools for the 21st-century economy." Schools are encouraged to partner with local businesses, organizations, and education agencies to incorporate on-the-job skills into traditional classroom learning. Upon mastering these skills, students in these programs across the country are able to earn certificates in different professional fields.

Los Angeles United School District (LAUSD) was awarded a \$7 million grant—the highest amount available to an individual district—for its innovative Linked Learning educational approach. Linked Learning appeals to students' interests in various professional fields to better prepare them for both college and a career. Students on a Linked Learning pathway have the

opportunity to expand their critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills, among many others, by applying their classroom knowledge to real-world experiences.

Linked Learning sets students up for success by making it easier to enter high-demand fields like information technology and computer science by integrating crucial skills with academic content mastery. A new evaluation report finds that students in Linked Learning pathways earn more credits in the first two years of high school compared to their peers.

Obama made the announcement at Bladensburg High School in Maryland, one of three high schools that will be served by a \$7 million Youth CareerConnect grant to Prince George's County Economic Development Corporation. Overall, the grant is expected to help prepare 2,500 high school graduates for high-demand jobs in information technology and health care.

“Part of our concern has been our high schools, a lot of them were designed with curriculums based on the 1940s and ’50s and ’60s, and haven’t been updated,” Obama said. “So the idea behind this competition is how ... we start making high school, in particular, more interesting, more exciting, more relevant to young people.”

More information on the Youth CareerConnect program, including a complete list of grantees, is available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/07/fact-sheet-youth-careerconnect>.



BUDGET BEAT: Secretary Duncan Discusses President’s Budget Request Before House Appropriations Subcommittee

In his April 8 testimony before the U.S. House Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education Appropriations Subcommittee on President Obama’s Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 budget request, **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** defended the president’s decision to fund new competitive grant programs while flat-funding formula grant programs such as Title I. Duncan stressed the need for high standards, but he said they did not need to be “common” and highlighted the president’s proposals to close achievement gaps, expand preschool access, support educators’ use of technology and data, and make college more affordable in order to ensure students can compete in a global economy.



“The fact is that we are falling further behind our international competitors educationally,” Duncan said. “We should recognize that as an urgent wake-up call. But we are sleeping through the alarm. In the U.S., we are still just talking about the steps many leading countries are actually taking to prepare their students for a competitive global economy. Falling behind educationally now will hurt our country economically for generations.”

Subcommittee members from both political parties pressed Duncan on Obama’s continued reliance on competitive grant programs. In his FY 2015 budget, Obama proposed a new Race to

the Top–Equity and Opportunity initiative, which will focus on improving the academic performance of students in the nation’s highest-poverty schools, and would reserve a portion of funds from state formula grant programs, such as career and technical education and special education, for competitive awards. In response, Duncan noted that approximately 89 percent of the U.S. Department of Education’s budget goes to formula programs, compared to 11 percent that goes to competitive programs. He also said that providing larger grants to innovators for models that could be replicated would go further in the long run than spreading smaller amounts across the country.

“To spread \$100 million across 15,000 school districts you get very, very little minimal impact,” Duncan said in defense of Obama’s proposal to reserve \$100 million in special education grants to provide incentives for states to improve academic outcomes for students with disabilities. “But to put \$100 million in some targeted places where people can create models for the rest of the country, we think that’s a way to start to change the culture and the conversation here.”

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) also received a lot of attention from subcommittee members during the question-and-answer portion of the hearing, with subcommittee members and Duncan agreeing that standards should be high, but left to the states.

“I’m just a big proponent of high standards,” Duncan said. “And whether they’re common or not is sort of secondary. We just want students to be college and career ready once they graduate from high school. We partner with states that have been part of that effort. We partner with states that have done their own thing as long as they can demonstrate high standards.”

And when asked what percentage of federal grants is tied to a state’s acceptance of CCSS, Duncan did not mince words. “Zero,” he said. “What we ask is that if states demonstrate to us, basically saying if their local institution of higher education can say that students hitting this benchmark will not have to take remedial classes; that’s our bar. So we’re partnering [with] states from Texas to Alaska to Virginia to Minnesota that haven’t been part of [the CCSS]. As long as states are, again, not dummifying things down, we want to work with them.”

Archived video from the hearing and Duncan’s complete testimony are available at <http://appropriations.house.gov/calendararchive/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=374542>.



E-RATE UPDATE: Alliance for Excellent Education Calls on FCC to Boost Funding for E-Rate Program

In comments submitted April 7, the Alliance for Excellent Education called on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to modernize the federal E-rate program in order to lay the foundation for expanding the program through increased funding. The comments were in response to the [E-Rate Public Notice issued by the FCC on March 6](#), regarding its plan to expand, modernize, and simplify E-rate, the federal government’s program for connecting the nation’s schools and libraries to the internet.

“The common-sense measures currently under consideration by the FCC are a necessary first step toward the permanent expansion of the E-rate program. I applaud the FCC’s progress and urge

them to quickly modernize the program so that additional funding can be secured and used effectively and efficiently to provide 99 percent of America’s students with access to high-speed broadband within the next five years,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia.**

E-rate has been a tremendous asset for the nation’s education system, but it needs to be modernized to meet current demands. When E-rate was first enacted in 1996, only 14 percent of the nation’s schools were connected to the internet. Today, 94 percent of schools and libraries are connected. Despite that success, many schools and libraries still do not have high-speed broadband, and the demand for E-rate funds outpaces supply by more than two-to-one. To help address the program’s unmet needs, the FCC recently committed to allocating an additional \$2 billion toward E-rate in order to bring high-speed internet access to an additional 20 million students attending 15,000 schools.

In addition to permanently increasing E-rate’s funding, the Alliance recommends focusing the \$2 billion in newly identified resources on Wi-Fi and other “internal connections” for which no funds were available in 2013; allowing specialized assistance to high-need applicants; reducing support for voice services in order to focus the program on high-speed broadband access; and implementing demonstration projects on a limited basis in order to identify new and innovative ways to provide students with access to high-speed broadband while they are not in school.

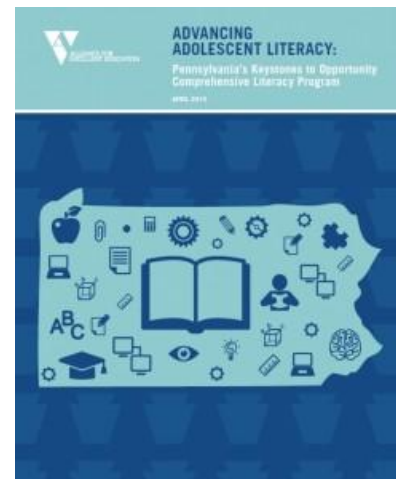
“Expanding high-speed internet in the nation’s schools and libraries is critical to ensuring that teachers and students have access to specialized technology and tools to make learning more personalized and engaging, an essential part of learning success in today’s world.” said Wise. “E-rate expansion through increased funding is vital to help them reach that goal. Now is the time for the FCC to take action to make that goal a reality.”

The Alliance’s comments to the FCC are available at <http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/FocusedCommentsERate040714.pdf>.



ADVANCING ADOLESCENT LITERACY: Pennsylvania Literacy Program Improves Student Opportunities, Outcomes, New Alliance Report Finds

As one of only six states receiving a federal Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy (SRCL) grant, Pennsylvania has designed and implemented an innovative program that focuses on improved instruction and interventions to ensure every student is literate and graduates from high school ready for college and a career. A new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education describes Pennsylvania’s grant initiative and highlights the state’s emphasis on professional learning and development to improve instruction, and ultimately, student achievement outcomes in literacy. The report, *Advancing Adolescent Literacy: Pennsylvania’s keystones to Opportunity Comprehensive Literacy Program*, includes a set of policy recommendations at the local, state, and federal levels.



“In a time when students must have reading and writing skills that compare with—and can compete with—their international peers, Pennsylvania has created a road map for improving literacy that all schools, districts, and states should observe closely,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia.**

Pennsylvania, along with Georgia, Louisiana, Montana, Nevada, and Texas, will receive a five-year federal SRCL grant, the report notes. Subsequently, through a competitive application process, Pennsylvania awarded \$36.7 million to fifty-three districts and two charter schools to improve literacy instruction and outcomes for students with the greatest needs. To ensure the funding yields the best possible result for students, the state developed a comprehensive literacy program—known as Keystones to Opportunity (KtO)—that enable districts to self-assess their literacy performance and the literacy needs of students at risk of falling behind.

“Despite what we know about the nature of the problems of struggling readers and the need to bring effective literacy strategies to life in content-area classrooms, what actually goes on in classrooms often remains removed from education policy and administration,” notes **KtO State Program Director Cindy Rhoads** in the report.

The report details how the KtO coordinators created online tools and professional learning approaches to help districts and schools improve literacy instruction. It describes five KtO training modules that provide an array of evidence-based practices to increase teachers’ effectiveness in integrating reading and writing into course work. With this focus on professional learning and development, the KtO program ensures that educators will have the tools and skills necessary to help students master content in the English language arts state standards.

The report recommends that policymakers at all levels build on these initial efforts made by Pennsylvania and other SRCL grantees to improve literacy in every state. Specifically, the report recommends federal policymakers to continue funding the SRCL grant program and expand support for state literacy initiatives to all states. At the state level, policymakers are called to review their current literacy plan and design a birth-through-grade-twelve program that will better prepare students for college and a career. At the local level, policymakers can start by creating supportive teaching and learning environments that prioritize professional development.

“The problem of low levels of literacy among the nation’s young adults is enormous, and the situation is becoming worse as literacy demands increase in a globalized, technologically savvy workforce,” said Wise. “Pennsylvania’s KtO program is showing promising results and success in preparing all students for the most basic cornerstones for success in college, a career, and life: reading and writing.”

The full report, including the comprehensive list of policy recommendations, is available online at <http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/advancing-adolescent-literacy-pennsylvanias-keystones-to-opportunity-comprehensive-literacy-program/>.



FALLING OUT OF THE LEAD: New Ed Trust Report Presents Stark High School Experiences Among High-Achieving Low-Income and Students of Color, Compared to White Peers

Black and Latino students from low-income families who enter high school as high achievers typically finish high school with lower grades, lower Advanced Placement (AP) exam pass rates, and lower SAT and ACT scores than their high-achieving white or more financially advantaged peers, according to *Falling Out of the Lead: Following High Achievers Through High School and Beyond*, a new report from the Education Trust (Ed Trust). Although high-achieving black and Latino students take similar courses in high school as their white peers, they attend schools where instruction, school culture, support, and guidance “render [them] less competitive upon high school graduation,” the report notes.

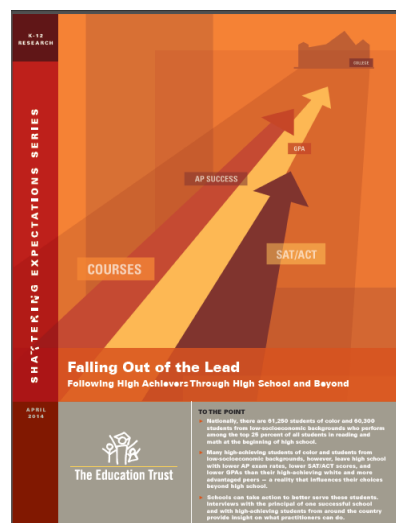
“These are the students who arrive at high school most ready to take advantage of rigorous and high-level instruction,” said **Marni Bromberg, research associate at Ed Trust and coauthor of the report.** “But to reach the academic levels that they are capable of, they need exposure to challenging curriculum as well as support and guidance from their schools, including in selecting a college that can really challenge them.”

According to the report, approximately 1 in 17 black and 1 in 9 Latino high school sophomores perform in the top achievement quartile, which is substantially lower than white and Asian students (1 in 3). Among low-income students, 1 in 10 performs within the highest achievement quartile, compared to nearly half of the most advantaged.

Compared to high-achieving white students, high-achieving black and Latino students are much more likely to attend urban schools, schools that serve predominantly students of color, and schools with higher enrollments—the average school enrollment for high-achieving black (1,700) and Latino students (2,000) is much higher than for white students (1,400), the report notes.

Although high-achieving students, regardless of race, are just as likely to take advanced courses, enrollment gaps begin to emerge in more advanced courses. According to the report, only 26 percent of high-achieving black students and 31 percent of high-achieving Latino students enroll in calculus when it is offered at their school, compared to 38 percent of high-achieving white students. When breaking out students based on income, the report finds that only 36 percent of high-achieving low-income students take calculus, compared with 45 percent of high-income students.

When examining AP courses, the report finds that high-achieving black, Latino, and white students take these courses at roughly the same rate, but students of color are less likely to receive passing grades; only 36 percent of high-achieving black students score a 3 or better on AP tests, compared to 51 percent of high-achieving Latino students, and 68 percent of high-achieving



white students. Among high-achieving low-income students, 45 percent score a passing grade, while 73 percent of high-achieving high-income students do so.

On college placement tests, such as the SAT and ACT, 24 percent of high-achieving black students and 29 percent of high-achieving Latino students do not even take these tests, compared with only 12 percent of high-achieving white students, the report finds. When high-achieving students of color do take the SAT or ACT, they score significantly lower than their white peers.

The report finds similar disparities in academic grade point averages (GPAs), with the average high-achieving black student receiving a 2.90 GPA, the average high-achieving Latino student receiving a 2.97 GPA, and the average high-achieving white student receiving a 3.24 GPA.

With lower scores on college entrance exams and lower GPAs, high-achieving black students (86 percent) and high-achieving Latino students (81 percent) are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education than their white peers (91 percent). While those percentages are fairly close, the report notes that the “real inequities” appear when examining where students enroll. According to the report, only about half of high-achieving black students and 40 percent of Latino students enter a moderately or highly selective college, compared to about 66 percent of their white peers.

“Unfortunately, these institutional differences matter when it comes to college graduation,” the report notes. “Students who attend more selective colleges and universities are ultimately more likely to graduate, compared with otherwise similar students who attend less selective colleges.”

In addition to the data summarized above, the report includes reflections from five high-achieving low-income students on their experiences in different high schools around the country. The students also offer advice on how high schools can better serve their high achievers.

“Serving high-achieving students well is a serious responsibility for our high schools,” said **Christina Theokas, director of research at Ed Trust and coauthor of the report.** “Our nation can’t afford this loss of potential. With attention, schools and educators can disrupt the inequitable outcomes experienced by black and Latino students and students from less-advantaged backgrounds.”

Falling Out of the Lead: Following High Achievers Through High School and Beyond is available at <http://www.edtrust.org/fallingoutofthelead>.

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).