

ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY ACT: Bipartisan Group of Federal Legislators Announces Agreement on Legislation to Modernize Workforce Development Programs and Re-Engage Out-of-School Youth

On May 21, a bipartisan group of legislators in the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives announced an agreement on legislation to modernize existing federal workforce development programs by helping workers attain skills for today's jobs, improving employment training and opportunities for people with disabilities, and providing support for out-of-school youth and youth career and technical skill development. The bill, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) would update the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), which has been due for reauthorization for more than a decade.

"Access to training, education, and employment services opens doors to the middle class across the country and helps strengthen the economy. This bipartisan, bicameral reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act will help ensure that all workers—including those with disabilities—can access these opportunities, while providing for better coordination and value to our workforce development system," [said Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions \(HELP\) Committee Chairman Tom Harkin \(D-IA\)](#). "It will stem the flow of young people into segregated employment by requiring that they be given experience in integrated settings, and require state vocational rehabilitation programs to work with individuals to develop an individual employment plan and support them in integrated work settings."

"We can't expect a modern workforce to succeed with an outdated job training system. The current workforce development system is broken with too much bureaucracy, too many inefficiencies, and too little accountability," [said House Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline \(R-MM\)](#). "The problems we face have been apparent for a long time and I am pleased we are moving toward adopting comprehensive reform that provides employers, workers, and taxpayers the job training solutions they deserve. I look forward to working with my colleagues in the House and Senate to send this agreement to the president's desk without delay."

Representing a compromise between the SKILLS (Supporting Knowledge and Investing in Lifelong Skills) Act, which passed the House in March 2013 and WIA of 2013, which passed the Senate HELP Committee in July 2013, the WIOA would focus youth program services on supporting programs that provide career pathways for youth, dropout recovery efforts, and education and training that lead to the attainment of a high school diploma and a recognized postsecondary credential. It would support entities with a proven ability to successfully connecting at-risk and out-of-school youth to the workforce while providing them with intensive

academics and career and technical education and training, as well as support services such as child care.

“Every year, federal workforce investments help millions of Americans get back to work, go back to school, and increase their skills for an economy that’s changing faster than ever, but for too long, we’ve been relying on workforce development programs written in the 1990s,” said **U.S. Senator Patty Murray (D-WA)**. “This bipartisan, bicameral legislation will bring federal worker programs into the twenty-first century, give workers and students the resources they need to succeed, and foster a workforce that American businesses rely on to compete.”

The WOIA would support programs that provide tutoring, study skills training, instruction, and evidence-based dropout prevention and recovery strategies that lead to a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent—including a recognized certificate of attendance or similar document for individuals with disabilities—or for a recognized postsecondary credential. It would also support the development of alternative, evidence-based programs and other activities that encourage young people to reenter and complete secondary education, enroll in postsecondary education and advanced training, progress through a career pathway, and enter into unsubsidized employment that leads to economic self-sufficiency.

“Each year, approximately 800,000 students drop out of school before earning a high school diploma,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “After dropping out, these young people often find themselves in ‘limbo,’ lacking the education and skills necessary for a good job, but disconnected from school and a supportive path to success. Although I would prefer to see a greater emphasis on earning a high school diploma rather than a GED, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act can help provide America’s disconnected youth with an important lifeline to re-engage with their education and take the steps necessary to become productive members of society.”

The bill would also allow for a study by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the U.S. Secretary of Labor to examine (1) characteristics of “disconnected youth,” who are young people not in school and not working; (2) ways in which they could have greater opportunities for education attainment and obtaining employment; and (3) resources available to assist them in obtaining the skills, credentials, and work experience necessary to become economically self-sufficient and reach their potential.

A one-page summary of the legislation is available at <http://1.usa.gov/1noDsoG>.



READY? OR NOT?: Roughly 40 Percent of High School Seniors Are College Ready According to New Report Based on NAEP Data

On May 7, data from the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—also known as the Nation’s Report Card—[shows that large percentages of the nation’s high school seniors performed below the proficient level in reading and math](#). One week later, on May 14, a new report based on the NAEP data says that only 38 percent of twelfth graders were academically prepared in reading for college while 39 percent were judged so in math. The report, *Towards the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as an Indicator of*

Academic Preparedness for College and Job Training, was released by the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), which sets policy for NAEP.

“The results are in—and unfortunately they are lackluster,” said **David Driscoll, chair of NAGB and former commissioner of education at the Massachusetts Department of Education.**

“But it is only by knowing these sobering data that we can build the sense of urgency needed to better prepare students for higher education. Failure to prepare America’s twelfth graders for higher education has personal ramifications for our students and an economic impact on our nation. When students have to take remedial courses in college, they have to pay for courses that do not further their degrees, take longer to graduate, are more likely to drop out and therefore may be less able to get jobs that increasingly require postsecondary education and training.”

Students need a score of 302 or better, which corresponds to the proficient achievement level, on the twelfth-grade NAEP reading text to meet the college preparedness benchmark outlined in the report. Students who reach that level are believed to possess the “knowledge, skills, and abilities” in reading that would make them academically prepared for college, defined as an overall first-year grade-point average of B- or better and a low probability of placing into remedial courses in college.

In mathematics, students must score 163 or higher on the twelfth-grade NAEP mathematics test to be considered prepared for college. A score of 163 is above the cut score for the basic level, but it is significantly lower than the proficient cut score of 176.

The report cautions that its academic preparedness findings should be considered “provisional estimates” as they are a “first step and subject to adjustment in the future.”

Compared to college admission tests like the ACT and SAT, which are generally taken prior to twelfth grade and are given only to a self-selected sample of students, NAEP is the only nationally representative sample of twelfth-grade student achievement, the report notes.

“Consequently, NAEP is uniquely positioned to serve as an indicator of academic preparedness for college and job training at grade 12—the point that represents the end of mandatory schooling for most students and the start of postsecondary education and training for adult pursuits,” the report reads.

In the video to the right, released by NAGB in conjunction with the report, high school and college students, as well as college professors, react to the findings from the report and explain why so few high school students graduate prepared for college.

The report spends significant time retracing how the decision was made to link twelfth-grade NAEP to college preparedness. Work originally began in 2004 when a blue-ribbon panel considering whether NAEP should continue to be given to twelfth graders recommended that the twelfth-



grade assessment be transformed to measure the student readiness for college, job training, and the military. “America needs to know how well prepared its high school seniors are ... [only NAEP] can provide this information ... and it is necessary for our nation’s continued well being that it be provided,” the panel states.

Looking ahead, NAGB will do additional research based on the 2013 data to determine whether NAEP can be used to report academic preparedness at the state level, by demographic subgroups, and for job training.

Towards the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as an Indicator of Academic Preparedness for College and Job Training is available at <http://bit.ly/1ho1j2k>.



DON'T CALL THEM DROPOUTS: New Report Explores Why Students Leave High School Before Graduation and What Encourages Them to Re-Engage

There is no single reason or factor that drives students to leave school without a high school diploma, nor is there a uniform profile of students who fail to graduate on time. Instead, students who drop out are likely dealing with a variety of risk factors while living in toxic home, school, and/or neighborhood environments. Those are two of the key takeaways from *Don't Call Them Dropouts: Understanding the Experiences of Young People Who Leave High School Before Graduation*, a new report from America's Promise Alliance based on in-depth interviews with more than 200 high school dropouts and a survey of more than 2,000 young adults ages 18–25 who did not complete high school on time.

“Over and over we heard from young people who wanted to stay in school, but multiple life events stood in their way of simply going to school and being able to concentrate on learning,” said **Jonathan Zaff, executive director of the America's Promise Alliance Center for Promise at Tufts University**, which conducted the research. “Gradually, they became overwhelmed. Perhaps most heart-breaking, they tried repeatedly and unsuccessfully to find adults who could help them.”

The report groups the twenty-five reasons individuals most frequently gave for leaving school without a diploma into four cross-cutting themes: (1) the effect of adverse health events on school completion; (2) the impact of violence on young people's mental health; (3) the influence of specific parent characteristics on youth well-being; and (4) whether young people perceive school as responsive and relevant to their day-to-day concerns.

“The reasons [individuals] cite for dropping out are the breaking point, the end of the story rather than the whole story,” the report notes.

According to the report, nongraduates spoke of encountering “multiple prevalent stressors” in their path to graduation, including witnessing or being victimized by violence, living in unsafe neighborhoods, experiencing unstable home lives or homelessness, taking responsibility for earning money to meet basic needs, or becoming caregivers for parents or siblings at a young age. While facing these challenges, young people sought connections wherever they could find them. Sometimes those connections helped students persist in school. In toxic environments,

however, young people often chose family caregiving, gang affiliation, or teen parenting over school attendance.

“Young people sought connection where it was offered; and from that connectedness both positive and negative decisions could emerge,” the report notes.

Parents were especially influential—both positively and negatively—in a young person’s decision-making process. According to the report, young people whose parent said he or she was proud of a child were 28 percent less likely to stop going to school. On the other hand, young people with a parent in jail were 79 percent more likely to leave school while students who were abused by a parent were 45 percent more likely to leave school.

One final theme that emerged in the report is resiliency—a word not typically associated with dropouts. Repeatedly, however, the report identifies individuals facing long odds who are moving forward as young, often single parents, or key breadwinners for their families. In many cases, these individuals are focused on day-to-day activities that do not typically include going back to school.

To help individuals restart their education, the report mentions integrated student services and comprehensive re-engagement programs that recognize the various factors that cause students to leave school. The report offers several recommendations for reducing the dropout rate and supporting at-risk youth, including ensuring that the voices of young people who have left school are included in discussions about policies, programs, and community activities; creating early-warning systems beyond the school building for young people who are affected by risk factors; and placing young people in central roles in designing and implementing solutions that will work with their peers.

The report is filled with quotes and personal stories from individuals who left school, some of which are included in the video to the right. The report also contains a trove of interesting data points about students who left school:

- Individuals who said they had a teacher who cared about them were 45 percent less likely to leave school.
- Participating in afterschool activities, and thus having the support of youth development workers, was related to a 67 percent lower likelihood of leaving school.
- Young people affected by homelessness were 87 percent more likely to leave school than those with a more stable place to live.

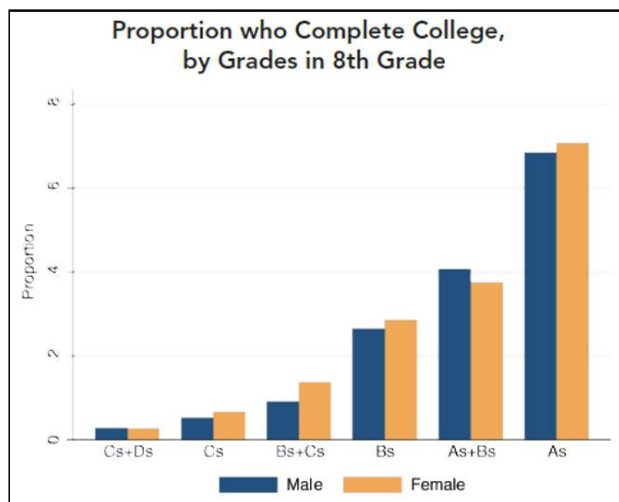
The complete report is available at <http://gradnation.org/NotDropouts>.





THE SECRET BEHIND COLLEGE COMPLETION: New Report Uses Middle School Grades to Predict Students' Likelihood of Earning College Degrees

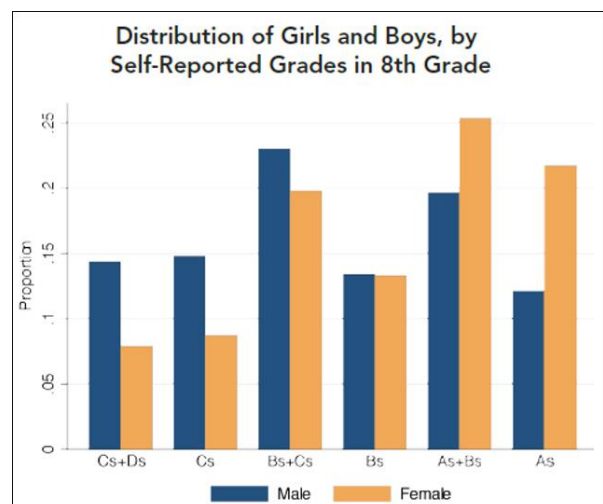
Students who earn mostly As in middle school have a nearly 70 percent chance of completing college by age twenty-five while those earning mostly Bs have only a 30 percent chance, according to a new report from Third Way. The report, *The Secret Behind College Completion: Girls, Boys, and the Power of Eighth Grade Grades*, uses the predictive power of middle school grades to explain why women are more likely to obtain college degrees than men.



The report focuses on middle school grades because middle school grades predict high school grades, which then predict college success. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the report finds that almost all students who earned As in middle school earned As or As and Bs in high school.

The report attributes this connection to the fact that high-performing middle school students tend to exhibit the same behavior patterns and academic performance in high school than they did in middle school. For example, they generally did more homework, were more likely to take Advanced Placement classes, and were less likely to encounter behavioral problems, such as frequent absences, tardiness, or suspensions as high school students.

For the most part, the students exhibiting more of these behaviors and faring better academically are girls. In fact, the report notes that girls' academic performance advantage over boys is already "well established" by the eighth grade. As shown in the graph to the right taken from the report, eighth-grade girls are significantly more likely to earn As or As and Bs than eighth-grade boys.



"Girls have a big advantage over boys in educational attainment, and this is largely because girls earn higher grades than boys," the report notes. "This substantial academic performance advantage of girls translates directly into their much higher rates of college completion and educational attainment more generally."

On the other hand, boys are much more likely to earn Cs or Cs and Ds in eighth grade than girls, making them much less likely to earn a college degree. According to the report, less than 10

percent of students who earn mostly Cs in middle school will complete a bachelor's degree by the time they turn twenty-five years old. "Poor academic performance in middle school heavily disadvantages students who aspire to get a college degree," the report notes.

In addition to its focus on middle school, the report also examines elementary school performance and finds sizeable gender gaps there as well. For example, kindergarten boys enjoy a slight lead over kindergarten girls in math—a gap that grows to about 0.25 standard deviations by third grade. Meanwhile, girls have about a 0.15 standard deviation advantage in reading at the beginning of kindergarten that mostly holds through the end of fifth grade.

The largest gap the report identifies in the early grades is a nearly 0.40 standard deviation in "social and behavioral skills"¹ that girls enjoy over boys at the start of kindergarten—a gap that grows to 0.53 by the end of fifth grade and is "considerably larger" than the gap between children from poor families and middle class families or the gap between black and white children. The report finds that the same general pattern exists in how teachers rate students' progress in language and literacy, general knowledge of science and social studies, and mathematical thinking.

The report offers several reasons for the gender gap, including that boys are more negatively affected than girls by growing up in families with absent or less-educated fathers and by classrooms that lack a strong learning-oriented environment. Additionally, it finds that many adolescent boys "underinvest in education" because "out-of-date masculine stereotypes" depict academic excellence as unmasculine and, as a result, fail to understand the strong connection between effort in school and success in the job market.

Writing about the study for the [New York Times](#), **David Leonhardt**, editor of "The Upshot," says the problem "doesn't simply involve men trying to overcome the demise of a local factory or teenage boys getting into trouble. It involves children so young that most haven't even learned the word 'gender.' Yet their gender is already starting to cast a long shadow over their lives."

The Secret Behind College Completion: Girls, Boys, and the Power of Eighth Grade Grades is available at <http://www.thirdway.org/publications/813>.

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, 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).

¹ According to the report, social and behavioral skills include attentiveness, task persistence, eagerness to learn, flexibility, organization, expressing feelings, ideas and opinions in positive ways, and showing sensitivity to the feelings of others.