



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



WHAT'S IN A NAME?: Public Support Slips for “Common Core” While Support for Common Standards Remains Strong, According to New Education Poll

Public support for the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is declining, according to results released last month from the 2014 *Education Next* poll. At the same time, however, the poll revealed that the declining support is more attributable to the name of the reform effort (Common Core) than the idea behind it of a state-developed set of common academic standards that describe what students need to know and be able to do in English and math to graduate from high school ready for college and a career.

When asked their opinion on the use of the CCSS in their states, 54 percent of the public express support—down from 65 percent last year. Among teachers, support fell even more drastically, from 76 percent in 2013 to 46 percent this year. However, a new question in this year's poll strips out the word “Common Core” and asks respondents whether they support “standards for reading and math that are the same across states.” In response to that question, 68 percent say yes.

“You can slap an unflattering name on apple pie and some people are going to say that they don't like it, even if what's in the pan hasn't changed,” [writes Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia, in reaction to the poll.](#)

Notably, support among African Americans for the CCSS remains steadfast and actually increased from 62 percent in 2013 to 69 percent in 2014. Additionally, even though fewer teachers express support for the CCSS, nearly three-quarters of teachers (73 percent) continue to believe that the CCSS set higher expectations for student performance than the standards most states used before the CCSS were introduced.

The Education Next poll also makes clear that a majority of the American public (57 percent) still have not heard of the CCSS, and of those who have, many are misinformed about what they represents. For example, 51 percent of the public mistakenly believe that the federal government requires all states to use the CCSS even though several states, including Texas and Virginia, never adopted them.

“Today, the words ‘Common Core’ have become a punching bag for much that's wrong in education and, in some instances, society as a whole,” writes Wise. “Given the hugely negative—and often misleading or downright incorrect—statements that appear about the Common Core in the media daily, it's no surprise to see support for ‘Common Core’ slipping.”

Indeed, the influence of the media on the CCSS debate is evident in results from the forty-sixth annual “[PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools](#)” that were also released last month. In that poll, nearly half of all respondents say they first heard about the CCSS from “television, newspapers, and the radio.” Only 17 percent first heard about the CCSS from teachers or other education professionals while school communications were the first source for 9 percent. That means that only 26 percent of the public first heard about the standards from the people who know them best and are working to implement them in their classrooms.

“In spite of what national polls say, there are teachers, principals, district leaders, and others who are actively implementing and teaching to the Common Core State Standards in more than thirty-five states nationwide,” Wise writes. “We never hear about how smoothly the transition to the Common Core is going in those states. Instead, we’re constantly bombarded by the media and opponents on Twitter about the handful of states that have withdrawn from the Common Core. That’s why I prefer to think of the Common Core glass as thirty-five to forty states full rather than three to four empty.”

More information on the 2014 *Education Next* poll is available at <http://educationnext.org/files/2014ednextpoll.pdf>.

CORE OF THE MATTER: School Supplies, Facebook and the Common Core

In the latest entry in the Alliance’s “Core of the Matter” blog series focusing on the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and struggling students, **Tom Murray, the Alliance’s director of state and district digital learning**, relays a conversation he overheard in the checkout line between two moms about the CCSS. He notes that most of the moms’ information was based on something they read on Facebook. Tom’s experience is not atypical—according to the recent “PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools” mentioned in the article above, nearly half of all respondents said they first heard about the CCSS from “television, newspapers, and the radio.” An additional 8 percent cited social media as their information source. Only 17 percent first heard about the CCSS from teachers or other education professionals.

“I left the store saddened,” Murray writes, “sad that those moms were getting the information about their own children’s education ... from Facebook—often the modern day version of a gossip column. I was saddened by the misconceptions; saddened that the lives of our kids, the future foundation of our nation, had become a political football.”

Using that conversation as a jumping-off point, Murray reflects on the tools and technology used to prepare students in past decades compared to the incredible work he’s seeing today—from teachers personalizing learning for every child to utilizing real-time data to make instructional decisions on the fly.

Read Murray’s complete blog post at <http://bit.ly/Z5RRxQ> and access previous blog posts from the Alliance’s Core of the Matter series at <http://bit.ly/1tDwmRU>.



APPROPRIATIONS UPDATE: Outcome of Congressional Elections Will Play a Key Role in This Year's Federal Funding Decisions

September 30 marks the end of the federal government's fiscal year and the day by which the twelve annual appropriations bills must be signed by President Obama to prevent a government shutdown. To date, however, the U.S. Congress has yet to send a single Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 appropriations bill to the president, necessitating a short-term continuing resolution (CR) that will keep the federal government open. Further complicating matters for education advocates is the overall lack of activity on the Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education appropriations bill that funds the U.S. Department of Education (ED).

Earlier this summer, the Senate Labor, HHS, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee [passed a bill that would fund ED at \\$45.06 billion in FY 2015](#), excluding Pell Grants. The total represents an increase of approximately \$530 million compared to FY 2014, but it is roughly \$750 million less than the amount President Obama requested in his FY 2015 budget. Although the Senate Appropriations Committee never met to consider the subcommittee's bill, the subcommittee's proposed funding levels for individual programs were made [publicly available](#). Meanwhile, the House Appropriations Committee took no public action on its version of the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill, leaving advocates in the dark about its funding priorities.

As the fiscal year draws to a close, Congress is expected to consider a CR that will keep the government running and postpone any funding decisions until mid-December. Looming between now and mid-December are the November 4 congressional elections and the possibility that Republicans will win enough seats to retake the U.S. Senate, giving them control of both chambers of Congress for the first time since 2007—a possibility that [some political prognosticators believe is more likely to occur than not](#).

One outside contender is an omnibus bill that wraps all twelve appropriations bills into a single bill as was the case last year. **U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Barbara Mikulski (D-MD)** hinted in late July that an omnibus bill would be her preference, but her counterpart in the House, **U.S. House Appropriations Committee Chairman Harold Rogers (R-KY)** expressed doubt that it could happen.

“We've only got two weeks in September—we've got to pass a CR and it'll be a crowded schedule in September,” [Rogers told Roll Call](#). “I'd like to, but I don't see a realistic way to get that done.”

Should Republicans gain control of the Senate, they could push for another short-term CR that would postpone funding decisions until January when the new Congress is sworn in and they could write more conservative spending bills. Another option could be a yearlong CR that would close the book on FY 2015 and likely freeze spending at or near FY 2014 levels. Unless Republicans reach sixty seats in the Senate, which is unlikely, Democrats could still block any spending plans that freeze or make deep cuts to domestic programs, such as those focused on education. Ultimately, what happens in early November will affect negotiations in mid-December.



TO WAIVE OR NOT TO WAIVE: Oklahoma Loses ESEA Waiver as U.S. Department of Education Grants Waiver Extensions to Twenty-Three Other States, Including Indiana

Saying that the state can “no longer demonstrate that [its] standards are college- and career-ready,” the U.S. Department of Education (ED) revoked the waiver it granted to Oklahoma for additional flexibility from certain provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). ED’s decision comes on the heels of **Oklahoma Governor Mary Fallin’s (R)** decision to sign legislation on June 5 [to repeal and replace the Common Core State Standards \(CCSS\)](#) in Oklahoma with the Oklahoma Priority Academic Student Skills (PASS) standards that the state used from 2003 to 2010. Oklahoma joins Washington as the second state to have its waiver revoked.

The decision to revoke Oklahoma’s waiver was outlined in [a letter to Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Instruction Janet Barresi](#) from **Deborah Delisle**, ED’s **assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education**. In the letter, Delisle writes that ESEA flexibility does not require states to adopt the CCSS; instead, it provides states with the option to “adopt college- and career-ready standards that are approved by a state network of institutions of higher education (IHEs), which must certify that students who meet the standards will not need remedial course work at the postsecondary level.” Delisle notes that Oklahoma notified ED on August 6 that the state “is not able to submit evidence from its state network of IHEs that the [PASS] standards in place prior to June 2010 are college- and career-ready, and that there is no timetable for that review to be completed.”

In a [statement](#), Barresi calls the loss of the waiver “disappointing and frustrating” and a “significant challenge” for the state’s districts and schools, but she acknowledges that the loss of the waiver became “all but inevitable” when the state withdrew from the CCSS. “Oklahoma must craft and implement outstanding academic standards for English language arts and math that are college- and career-ready,” Barresi says. “To simply take PASS standards and attempt to improve them and call them college- and career-ready may satisfy the federal government to allow flexibility in spending, but it relegates our children to the same sad culture and set of expectations that existed when I entered office.”

By losing its waiver, Oklahoma must now meet the requirements outlined in NCLB, including a provision that 100 percent of Oklahoma students be proficient in reading and math by this school year or be deemed “in need of improvement” and subject to correctional action. Barresi notes that the number of schools designated as such will grow from 460 schools to more than 1,600 schools—nearly 90 percent of the state’s public schools—as a result of the state’s loss of its ESEA waiver. The loss of the waiver means that the state must proceed with overhauling schools identified as in need of improvement. The state would have also had to set aside roughly \$30 million in Title I funds to pay for tutoring and school choice for students at those 1,600 schools, but ED granted Oklahoma until the start of the 2015–16 school year to meet those requirements.

Indiana also withdrew from the CCSS but had its waiver extended because the new standards it adopted [were considered to be a combination of the CCSS and previous content standards the](#)

[state has used](#). And in a key difference from Oklahoma, Indiana’s new standards were deemed college and career ready by Indiana’s IHEs. These new standards will be a combination of the CCSS as well as previous content standards that the state has developed and used in classrooms.

Over the course of the summer, the Obama administration has approved one-year extensions through the 2014–15 school year for the District of Columbia and twenty-three states,¹ including Indiana, for continued flexibility with (i.e., waivers from) certain provisions of ESEA.

“ESEA flexibility has allowed states to move beyond the one-size-fits-all mandates of NCLB, to be more innovative, and to engage in continued improvement in ways that benefit educators and students,” said **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan**. “As a result, we have seen a renewed focus by states on improving student achievement, and to address the needs of all students, especially those groups of students that have been historically underserved.”

The waivers have been extended under a [streamlined process that ED announced last November](#) in which 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.

Additionally, Duncan announced in an August 21 appearance at Jefferson Middle School in Washington, DC that states with ESEA waivers can request a delay until the 2015–16 school year for the deadline that they use student test results in teacher evaluations.

“It doesn’t make sense to hold [teachers] accountable during this transition year for results on the new assessments—a test many of them have not seen before—and as many are coming up to speed with new standards,” Duncan writes in a [blog post](#) after his August 21 appearance.

“Assessment is a vital part of teaching and learning, but it should be one part (and only one part) of how adults hold themselves responsible for students’ progress. ... Schools, teachers and families need and deserve clear, useful information about how their students are progressing. ... But assessment needs to be done wisely. No school or teacher should look bad because they took on kids with greater challenges. Growth is what matters. No teacher or school should be judged on any one test, or tests alone—always on a mix of measures—which could range from classroom observations to family engagement indicators.”

Forty-three states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico currently have ESEA flexibility. Of those forty-three states, thirty-five are due to see their flexibility expire this summer. Of those, thirty-four states have submitted an extension request and twenty-three received an extension of their waiver from ED.

¹ The twenty-three states are Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wisconsin.



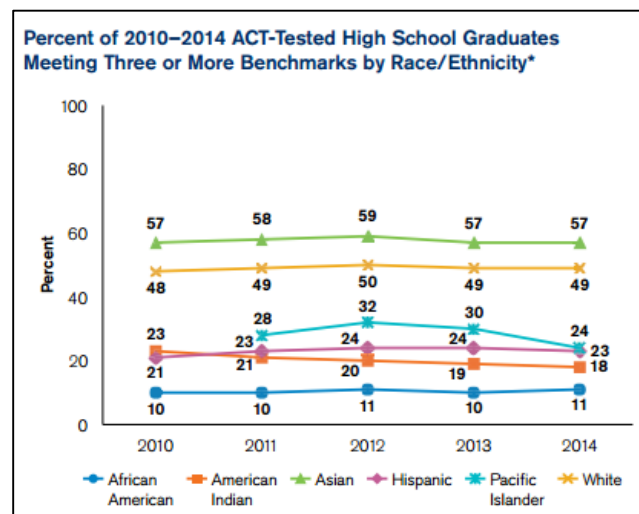
THE CONDITION OF COLLEGE & CAREER READINESS 2014: Only 26 Percent of Class of 2014 Graduates Deemed College Ready by ACT

Although the number of students taking the ACT college-readiness assessment continues to increase, large percentages of high school graduates continue to fail to meet college-readiness benchmarks in key subjects. According to *The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2014*, released last month by ACT, only 26 percent of high school graduates from the Class of 2014—the same percentage as last year—met the college-readiness benchmark in all four subjects tested on the ACT.²

Among individual subjects, 64 percent of graduates met the college-readiness benchmark in English while the percentages were lower in reading (44 percent), mathematics (43 percent), and science (37 percent). These percentages were roughly unchanged from the previous year.

“High school performance has been flat for more than a decade,” **Alliance for Excellent Education Senior Fellow Robert Rothman** told *Education Week*. “We’ve seen it on NAEP, we’ve seen it on [the global] PISA [exam], and now we see it again on the ACT. The good news is that graduation rates have gone up. Students are staying in school, but they are not achieving any more. Young people are not going to succeed in college or the workplace at the current levels of performance.”

Approximately 40 percent of high school graduates met at least three benchmarks, but 31 percent of graduates failed to meet the college-readiness benchmark in any subject. When broken down by race/ethnicity, the data reveals continued achievement gaps between white students and students of color. As shown in the graph to the right, Asian (57 percent) and white (49 percent) students were much more likely to meet at least three benchmarks compared to Pacific Islander (24 percent), Hispanic (23 percent), American Indian (18 percent), and African American (11 percent) students. These gaps have remained relatively unchanged since 2010.



“Achievement gaps can be stubbornly difficult to close,” said **Jon Erickson, ACT president of education and career solutions**. “We must ramp up our efforts to ensure that underserved students receive the same resources and educational opportunities as their peers. This is particularly important given recent media reports that this year, for the first time, the majority of U.S. public school students will not be white.”

² According to the report, the ACT college-readiness benchmarks are scores on the ACT subject-area tests that “represent the level of achievement required for students to have a 50 percent chance of obtaining a B or higher or about a 75 percent chance of obtaining a C or higher in corresponding credit-bearing first-year college courses.”

The good news is that more students overall and more students of color are taking the ACT. Nationally, more than 1.8 million students, or 57 percent of the graduating Class of 2014, took the ACT—an increase of 18 percent since 2010. During the same time period, the testing pool has become more diverse, with the percentage of Hispanics taking the ACT increasing from 10 percent to 15 percent and the percentage of white students decreasing from 62 percent to 56 percent. The percentages of Asian, African American, and American Indian students taking the test has largely remained the same.

“The increases we are experiencing are good news for the nation, as they point to growing interest in higher education among our young people,” said **Jon Whitmore, ACT chief executive officer**. “In today’s global economy, it is more important than ever for individuals to continue their education beyond high school. The skills needed to compete in the job market are becoming increasingly advanced.”

The report also finds that 86 percent of the high school graduates from the Class of 2014 hoped to enroll in postsecondary education, which is down slightly from 87 percent for the Class of 2013. However, only 69 percent of the Class of 2013 actually enrolled in postsecondary education, meaning that nearly 315,000 graduates failed to do so.

The report offers several recommendations for how states, districts, schools, and classrooms can increase student readiness for college-level work, including high-quality assessment systems, rigorous high school core curricula, early warning systems that help educators identify and intervene with at-risk students, and “thoughtful and fair” teacher evaluation systems that include multiple measures of performance, among others.

The complete report is available at <http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/cccr14/about.html>.

Achieve Creates New Tool to Help School Districts Track Their Use of Assessments

Earlier this summer, Achieve launched the Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts, a new tool to help school district leaders to take stock of how many assessments are administered throughout a school year and for what purposes they are given.

Designed from a student perspective, the tool can be used by education leaders to make decisions about what amount of testing is appropriate and provide more transparency for parents about the testing in schools. It supports a process by which districts evaluate current assessments; determine the minimum testing necessary to serve essential diagnostic, instructional, and accountability purposes; and work to ensure that every district-mandated test is useful and of high quality. The Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts is available at <http://www.achieve.org/assessmentinventory>.

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; Ariana Witt; 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), Facebook (www.facebook.com/all4ed), and the Alliance’s “High School Soup” blog (www.all4ed.org/blog).