



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



NCLB REWRITE ADVANCES: Senate Begins Bipartisan Negotiations as House Committee Passes Partisan Bill

Five days after two key U.S. Senators announced that they would begin bipartisan negotiations on a bill to rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the U.S. House committee responsible for rewriting the law passed a partisan bill that drew criticism from civil rights groups and the [U.S. Secretary of Education](#).

The House bill, formally known as the Student Success Act, passed the House Committee on Education and the Workforce by a party-line vote on February 11—eight days after it was first introduced. **House Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline (R-MN)** said the bill would “[\[reduce\] the federal footprint, \[restore\] local control, and \[empower\] parents and education leaders to hold schools accountable.](#)” Democrats disagreed and charged that the bill would “[turn back the clock on American public education and harm \[the\] nation’s neediest children.](#)”

The Student Success Act would eliminate more than sixty-five education programs, including the School Improvement Grant program, which targets high schools with graduation rates below 60 percent and other low-performing schools, and the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy program, which provides reading help for struggling students from preschool through grade twelve. Republicans believe this approach, which delivers federal money to states without specific instructions on how to spend it, would give states flexibility to spend the money how they see fit. Democrats counter that states are unlikely to spend the money on schools and students most in need and could be tempted to spend the money on non-educational purchases. In his [weekly video address](#) on February 14, President Obama said that the Student Success Act “could let states and cities shuffle education dollars into things like sports stadiums or tax cuts for the wealthy.”

The bill would keep NCLB’s testing schedule, which requires states to assess students in reading and math every year in grades three through eight and once in high school, but it would eliminate the federal accountability system, including NCLB’s “adequate yearly progress” measure. Instead, it would require states to create their own systems to measure school and student performance and hold schools responsible for student performance. **Margaret Spellings, who served as U.S. Secretary of Education under President George W. Bush**, told [Politico](#) that such an approach offers “too much flexibility for states.” She noted that states did not have very strong accountability systems prior to NCLB and warned that they “could head down that path again.”

In a [statement](#), **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**, said that House Republicans are “forgetting the safeguards and support that [ESEA] provides to the nation’s most disadvantaged students.” He said the Student Success Act does not hold states and school responsible for improving high school graduation rates, would not target resources to the lowest-performing high schools, and does not require interventions when traditionally underserved students consistently demonstrate low performance. “Changes to the law should reflect what the nation has learned since NCLB passed, while preserving key protections for low-income students, students of color, and other underserved students,” Wise said.

Looking ahead, the brisk action in the House is likely to continue, with the Student Success Act expected to be voted on by the full House of Representatives during the week of February 23.

On the other side of the U.S. Capitol, action in the Senate, which has already held two hearings and a roundtable discussion with education experts, has moved behind closed doors after the [February 6 announcement](#) by **Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN)** and **top committee Democrat Patty Murray (D-WA)** that their staffs would begin bipartisan negotiations. These staff-level discussions are likely focused on big-ticket items, such as accountability, assessment, and funding.

In the [latest episode of “Federal Flash,”](#) the Alliance for Excellent Education’s weekly five-minute video update on federal education policy, **Jessica Cardichon, the Alliance’s senior director of policy and advocacy**, noted that longer negotiations increase the likelihood of a bipartisan bill, but they also push back the date when the Senate HELP Committee can vote on the bill. She added that Alexander probably wants to move the bill out of committee and to the Senate floor in March or April before other priorities begin to take up valuable floor time.

Most education observers believe that action on the House and Senate floors to rewrite NCLB will be the opening act, with the House passing a bill representing the conservative approach to education reform and the Senate possibly putting forward a more bipartisan approach—although that outcome is still very much in the air. Ultimately, the main event will take place when the House and Senate work behind closed doors to hammer out a compromise that is acceptable to sixty members of the Senate and President Obama.



DIGITAL LEARNING DAY: Four School Districts to Be Featured During Annual Celebration of Great Teaching and Effective Use of Technology on March 13

School leaders and teachers from four innovative school districts will join thousands of teachers in Washington, DC, for the fourth-annual Digital Learning Day on Friday, March 13. Concurrently, tens of thousands of teachers, librarians, and administrators in all fifty states and the District of Columbia will celebrate and showcase their best uses of technology for learning through hundreds of local events in their own schools and classrooms.

“Digital Learning Day is as much about great teaching as it is about technology,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education**, which created Digital Learning Day in

2012. “It’s about how technology can empower and support teachers, personalize learning for students, and ensure that all students have the great teaching—and great tools—they need to succeed in today’s hyper-connected world.”

The four districts selected—Baltimore County Public Schools, Houston Independent School District, Huntsville School District (AR), and Vista Unified School District (CA)—represent different sizes and types of districts, but each brings a compelling story of how a vision for improved student learning led to the effective use of technology and improved educational outcomes for traditionally underserved students.

“From small, rural districts like Huntsville to very large urban ones like Houston, these districts offer excellent examples of how digital learning is engaging students and empowering teachers across the nation,” said Wise. “The Alliance for Excellent Education created Digital Learning Day to highlight what is working in schools and encourage greater adoption of high-quality digital learning to ensure that all youth have access to those opportunities regardless of where they live.”

For the first time, the Alliance will hold Digital Learning Day in conjunction with the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards’s “Teaching & Learning” conference. As part of the partnership, the Alliance will host *Digital Learning Day Live!*, a one-hour live broadcast from the Teaching & Learning conference in Washington, DC, to an in-person audience of more than 3,000 teachers and administrators from all fifty states and the District of Columbia who attend the conference, as well as hundreds of thousands of educators who will be watching online. *Digital Learning Day Live!* will feature national leaders in education technology, as well as representatives from the four innovative school districts selected.

“Like Digital Learning Day, the Teaching & Learning conference is about highlighting effective educators and others involved in pre-K through twelfth-grade education and spreading effective teaching practices to those on the front lines of education reform, making it a natural fit,” said **Ronald Thorpe, president and chief executive officer of the National Board.**

Educators nationwide are welcome to celebrate and participate in Digital Learning Day and can learn more about how to get involved at www.DigitalLearningDay.org. The website includes toolkits and sample digital lessons for teachers, video profiles of digital learning in action, and other activities and ideas on how to participate.



THE BIG 80s: U.S. National High School Graduation Rate Hits All-Time High of 81 Percent

The national high school graduation rate for the Class of 2013 was 81 percent—the highest ever recorded, according to new data released on February 12 from the U.S. Department of Education (ED). The rate is up from 80 percent for the Class of 2012 and 79 percent for the Class of 2011.

“America’s students have achieved another record-setting milestone,” [said U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan](#). “We can take pride as a nation in knowing that we’re seeing promising gains, including for students of color. This is a vital step toward readiness for success

in college and careers for every student in this country, and these improvements are thanks to the hard work of teachers, principals, students, and families.”

The measurement is based on the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR), a common graduation rate calculation that states, school districts, and schools have used since 2010. The ACGR measures the percentage of students who successfully complete high school in four years and graduate with a regular high school diploma.

In November 2014, [ED released ACGR state-level data](#) showing that eighteen states have high school graduation rates at or above 85 percent. That data set also includes state graduation rates for students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency. ED hopes to release national graduation rates for students of color, students with disabilities, and English language learners in the coming weeks.



(SIG)NIFICANT BENEFITS: Federal School Improvement Grants Close Urban Schools’ Achievement Gaps and Advance High School Students Toward Graduation, New Report Finds

A new report from the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) finds that urban high schools receiving a federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) improved their ability to promote students from one high school grade to the next, resulting in fewer students being held back in ninth grade and higher percentages of students reaching grades eleven and twelve.

“The results of this study indicate that urban schools have made significant improvements with the federal funds they received through the School Improvement Grants, although they have much further to go,” said **Michael Casserly, executive director of the CGCS**. “The gains suggest that the federal government should retain its targeted and dedicated efforts to improve the nation’s lowest-performing schools.”

As shown in the table below taken from the report, 29.96 percent of high school students in CGCS districts were ninth graders in School Year (SY) 2009–10. By SY 2011–12, the percentage of ninth-grade students dropped to 28.06 percent while the percentage of eleventh graders increased from 22.7 percent to 23.05 percent and the percentage of twelfth graders increased from 20.58 percent to 21.53 percent.

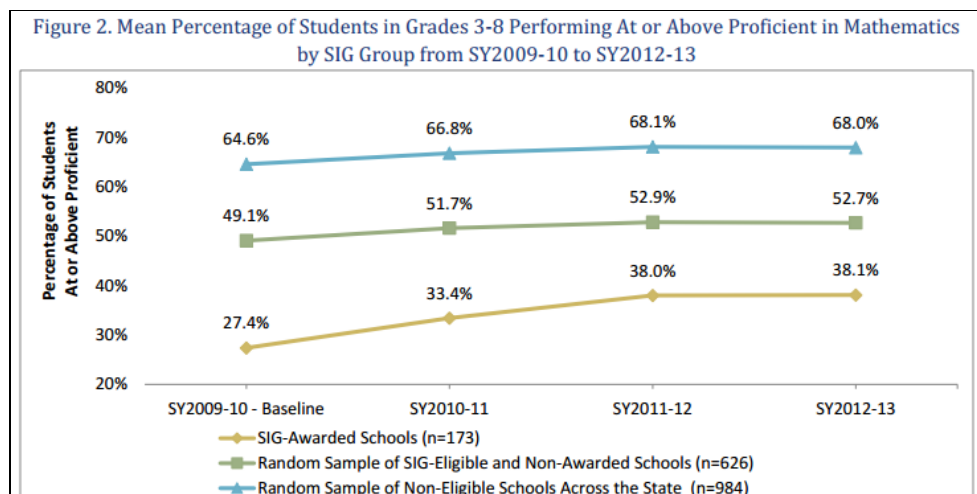
School Year	Ninth Grade	Tenth Grade	Eleventh Grade	Twelfth Grade
2009–10	29.96%	26.76%	22.70%	20.58%
2010–11	28.81%	26.64%	22.97%	21.59%
2011–12	28.06%	25.73%	23.05%	21.53%

The report, *School Improvement Grants: Progress Report from America’s Great City Schools*, notes that the larger percentage of ninth-grade students is a “common and long-standing enrollment pattern” in which ninth graders “stack up” because they have not passed core courses and have not accumulated sufficient credits to move up to subsequent grades.

“Smoothing out this distribution is one possible effect that SIG might have on urban school systems,” the report notes. Additionally, the report says that reducing ninth-grade enrollments while increasing enrollments in the upper high school grades is a “leading indicator of improvements in high school graduation rates.”

By using state assessment data to compare non-SIG-eligible schools—which tend to be higher performing—with SIG-awarded schools, the report also finds positive results for grades three through eight in urban schools that received SIG funds.

As shown in the graph below, 64.6 percent of students at non-SIG-eligible schools performed at or above proficient in SY 2009–10, compared to only 27.4 percent of SIG-awarded schools—a gap of 37.2 percentage points. By SY 2012–13, the gap had narrowed to 29.9 percentage points. The report finds similar results for reading, and it notes that achievement gaps narrowed steadily in both math and reading in the first two years but leveled off in the third year.



Using feedback from interviews with district- and building-level staff from urban school districts, the report includes elements that appear to lead to more successful implementation efforts, including clear, coherent, and coordinated district plans for supporting and turning around the lowest-performing schools; interventions focused on instructional improvements; professional development that builds staff instructional capacity; principals who were given the flexibility to make staff changes or remove ineffective educators; and the ability to leverage data to identify the specific academic needs of struggling students.

The report cautions that a “major challenge” facing all SIG schools will be the need to sustain academic gains after federal dollars go away. “Urban district and school leaders interviewed for this project voiced both optimism and concern for the future,” the report notes. “The SIG program provided districts with opportunities for intensive reform and collaboration to meet the needs of struggling schools. Whether these improvements are sustainable will ultimately determine the value and impact of the endeavor.”

School Improvement Grants: Progress Report from America’s Great City Schools is available at <http://bit.ly/17iTsE5>.



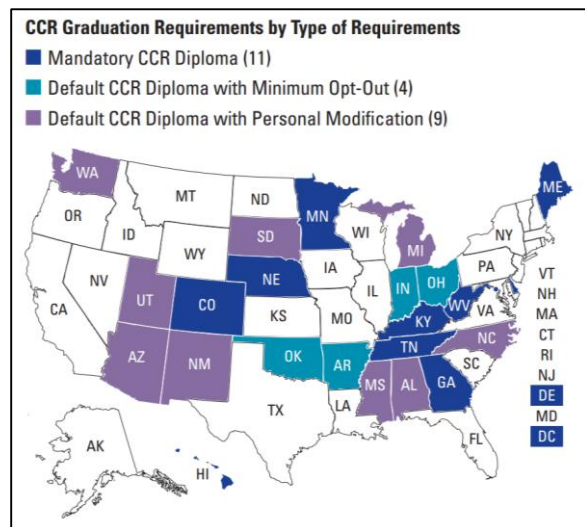
CLOSING THE EXPECTATIONS GAP: Less Than Half of U.S. States Have Aligned Graduation Requirements with New College- and Career-Ready Standards, New Report Finds

Achieve’s ninth annual *Closing the Expectations Gap* report credits all fifty states for adopting college- and career-ready (CCR) standards in mathematics and English language arts (ELA) for grades K–12, but it notes that only twenty-three states and the District of Columbia have raised their high school graduation requirements to align with these standards. As a result, more than half of U.S. states do not require a CCR preparatory course of study for an individual to graduate from high school.

“For the implementation of CCR standards to be meaningful, students must be required to actually be exposed to all of the states’ mathematics and ELA standards in order to receive a high school diploma,” the report notes. “While CCR standards define the academic knowledge and skills necessary for postsecondary success, they are not self-executing. The standards need to be translated into courses and learning experiences for students. . . . Exposing all students to the full range of CCR standards by requiring students to complete a course of study in high school aligned to the full set of CCR expectations is one of the most important ways states can help ensure that graduates will be academically prepared for their next steps after high school.”

As shown in the map to the right taken from the report, ten states and the District of Columbia have established a mandatory CCR diploma, which typically includes at least three years of mathematics and four years of ELA. An additional thirteen states automatically enroll all students in a CCR course of study, but permit students to opt out of the requirements or modify courses with their parents’ permission.

The report notes that the remaining twenty-seven states “undoubtedly have gaps between the content and skills articulated in the standards and the courses currently required for a high school diploma.”



Regardless of a state’s graduation requirements, the report says that every state should “collect the data necessary to enable them to analyze course-taking patterns of high school students.” Such data would allow states to determine how prepared their high school graduates are for college, what percentage need remedial courses in college, and whether there are gaps in completion of CCR courses of study based on race, gender, income, or other factors.

According to the report, thirty-two states say their data systems can or will enable them to know which courses best prepare students for college and career success while eight additional states plan to develop such systems. Even though most states have the ability to analyze course-taking data, the report notes that very few have actually completed a comprehensive analysis of their data.

In addition to standards and graduation requirements, *Closing the Expectations Gap* also focuses on assessments and accountability systems. It notes that thirty-six states will administer an assessment this year that can measure students' readiness for first-year credit bearing college courses in math and ELA. While some of these states belong to one of the two common assessment consortia (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers or Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium) that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards, others will administer the ACT or SAT to all students—usually in the eleventh grade.

Regarding accountability, the report finds that thirty-seven states and the District of Columbia publicly report or include in their school accountability formulas at least one of the four accountability indicators that Achieve identifies as critical to promoting college and career readiness: (1) percentage of students who graduate from high school with a CCR diploma; (2) percentage of students who score at the college-ready level on high school assessments aligned with CCR standards; (3) percentage of students who earn college credit through Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and/or dual enrollment; and (4) percentage of high school graduates who are placed into postsecondary courses in remedial reading, writing, or mathematics. The report notes that no state uses all of the indicators in its accountability system, but Hawaii and Texas publicly report school-level data on each of the four indicators.

Closing the Expectations Gap is based on a survey that Achieve conducts annually with each state and the District of Columbia on the steps they are taking to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared to succeed in college and the workplace.

“States have made some progress in closing the expectations gap and aligning high school expectations with those of colleges and the working world,” said **Mike Cohen, president of Achieve**. “However, this year’s survey also tells us that there is much work yet to be done if all students are to graduate from high school prepared for success. While all states have college- and career-ready standards in place, standards alone are not enough. Each state must employ a coherent approach to college and career readiness, which includes having policies that align graduation requirements, assessments, and accountability systems, to graduate all students ready for their next steps.”

Closing the Expectations Gap is available at <http://www.achieve.org/files/Achieve-ClosingExpectGap2014%20Feb5.pdf>.

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).