



# StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **DIGITAL LEARNING DAY: Alliance's Annual Celebration of Great Teaching and Effective Use of Technology Spotlights Four Innovative School Districts, Offers Lessons on Digital Learning Implementation**

On March 13, the Alliance for Excellent Education hosted a very successful fourth annual Digital Learning Day from the 2015 Teaching & Learning Conference, which brought thousands of teachers and administrators to Washington, DC. Created by the Alliance, Digital Learning Day is a nationwide celebration that highlights great teaching and demonstrates how technology can improve students' education outcomes.

"Digital Learning Day is as much about great teaching as it is about technology," said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education**. "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 headline event was [\*Digital Learning Day Live!\*](#), which was moderated by **NBC Chief Education Correspondent Rehema Ellis**, and featured school leaders and teachers from four innovative schools and districts. (Access archived video from *Digital Learning Day Live!* by clicking on the image to the right.)



Concurrently with *Digital Learning Day Live!*, tens of thousands of teachers, librarians, and administrators in all fifty states and the District of Columbia also celebrated and showcased their best uses of technology for learning through [more than 1,800 local events](#) in their own schools and classrooms.

*Digital Learning Day Live!* celebrated the Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) December decision to increase funding for the federal E-rate program by \$1.5 billion annually to improve internet connections, expand high-speed Wi-Fi access to millions of students, and connect 99 percent of all students to broadband within five years. The vote came ten months after Digital Learning Day 2014, when **FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler** first announced plans to expand the nearly twenty-year-old E-rate program.

Wise called the E-rate expansion a "huge step forward for ensuring that all students and teachers have access to high-quality digital learning opportunities," but he noted that equal access was

only the first step. “Ensuring equal opportunity and equitable outcomes requires technology to be implemented strategically and meaningfully in schools,” Wise said.

To that end, the Alliance highlighted how four districts—Baltimore County Public Schools, Houston Independent School District (ISD), Saint Paul Schools (AR), and Vista Unified School District (CA)—are using technology as part of a larger plan to improve teaching and learning. The districts represented a cross section of urban, suburban, and rural areas but shared innovative ideas and promising practices for digital learning implementation.

Representing Saint Paul Schools were **Daisy Dyer Duerr, K–12 principal of Saint Paul Schools**, and **Lendy Eaton, a math teacher at Saint Paul High School**, who described how Saint Paul Schools uses a “Bring Your Own Device” (BYOD) program to build trust among teachers and students while personalizing learning based on individual student needs. Prior to its digital transformation in the 2012–13 school year, Saint Paul High School was in its second year of mandated school improvement for failing to meet adequate yearly progress in both literacy and math. It is now designated a “Top 10 Percent Performing School” in Arkansas. (For a short video overview of Saint Paul High School’s efforts, click the image above or visit <https://youtu.be/0Tyt1BA1XD0>.)



**Vista Unified School District Superintendent Devin Vodicka** shared how his district’s communitywide outreach program helped it create twenty-first-century learning environments through the deployment of digital devices such as laptops, tablets, and other internet-connected devices. Vista USD is on track to pair every student with a digital device within three years. It has also worked to improve network infrastructure to accommodate multiple wireless connections from every student simultaneously, including those in outdoor environments surrounding the school.

Vista USD is now shifting attention to enabling more families to obtain connectivity at home and has sold more than 5,000 refurbished computers to low-income families last year through the help of community partners. Through its efforts, the district has seen increased school attendance, decreased suspension and expulsion rates, more students taking Advanced Placement courses, and an overall improvement in college and career readiness. (For a short video overview of Vista USD’s digital learning efforts, click on the image to the right or visit <https://youtu.be/yTUNdeZlbzg>.)



As the seventh largest school district in the United States, Houston ISD serves 215,000 students, more than 80 percent of whom are economically disadvantaged. **Annie Wolfe, Houston ISD officer of secondary curriculum and development**, described how the district sent teachers and leaders to Mooresville Graded School District (NC) to observe Mooresville’s one-to-one initiative, which pairs every student with a laptop from fourth grade on, and learn how to

implement a similar program at Houston ISD. She explained how Houston ISD's "PowerUp" program enables teachers to use technology more effectively to facilitate instruction, as well as the district's decision to prioritize professional development and provide teachers with time to work together. (For a short video on Houston ISD's efforts to train its teachers on technology use, click on the image above or visit [https://youtu.be/60K4YRC\\_-iI](https://youtu.be/60K4YRC_-iI).)



Representing Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) were **Superintendent S. Dallas Dance** and **Courtney Warlick, a third-grade teacher at Hawthorne Elementary School**. The pair discussed the district's efforts to use technology to transform teaching and learning to create student-centered learning environments that provide all students with access to rigorous content and anytime, anywhere learning. The segment also focused on the district's one-to-one initiative, which aims to provide all students with a personal digital learning device by 2018. As a result of their learning-centered environments and technology initiatives, BCPS has seen significant improvement among students in its lowest-performing schools. (For a short video of Baltimore County's digital transformation and its accelerated math program, click the image to the right or visit <https://youtu.be/V-Cg3qZPMIo>.)



To ensure that districts are following the examples provided by the featured districts and are taking the necessary steps *before* they purchase new technology, the Alliance unveiled the Future Ready Interactive Planning Dashboard. The dashboard is a free online tool to help school districts assess their needs and make data-informed decisions on how to effectively use technology to engage students, empower teachers, and improve learning outcomes. (For more information on the dashboard, see the article on page 4).

Directly following *Digital Learning Day Live!*, the Alliance screened the world premiere of **PBS NewsHour Education Correspondent and filmmaker John Merrow's** new PBS documentary film, "[School Sleuth: The Case of the Wired Classroom](#)." The film's message was a strong one: computers cannot replace teachers; the combination of strong teaching and modern technology can transform schools into vibrant places where students have more control over their own learning and move at their own pace.

"John Merrow's new PBS documentary film fit perfectly with the message of Digital Learning Day," said Wise. "It highlighted a blended approach that pairs classroom teachers with digital content and tools in an effort to personalize learning and improve student outcomes. It also encourages school and district leaders to develop a plan for how they will use technology before they make a technology purchase."

To learn more about Digital Learning Day and to access archived video, toolkits, and sample digital lessons for teachers, visit [www.DigitalLearningDay.org](http://www.DigitalLearningDay.org).



## **FUTURE READY INTERACTIVE PLANNING DASHBOARD: Alliance for Excellent Education's New Tool Helps School Districts Determine Readiness for Technology**

Nationwide, more than 1,700 school district superintendents have taken the [Future Ready pledge](#)—a promise to personalize learning for students using digital tools. To help them fulfill their promise—and determine their readiness to do so—the Alliance for Excellent Education has unveiled the Future Ready Interactive Planning Dashboard, a free online tool to help school districts assess their needs and make data-informed decisions on how to effectively use technology to engage students, empower teachers, and improve learning outcomes.

“Before school districts make a technology *purchase*, they must develop a *plan* for how they will use technology effectively to address their specific challenges and learning goals,” said Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education. “The Future Ready Interactive Planning Dashboard helps districts understand their readiness to implement digital learning and determine if they are even ready to make additional investments in technology.”

Built with financial support from AT&T and McGraw-Hill Education, the Future Ready Interactive Planning Dashboard was unveiled on March 13 as part of [Digital Learning Day Live!](#), a 75-minute live broadcast to an in-person audience of thousands of teachers and administrators from around the country, as well as thousands more who watched online.

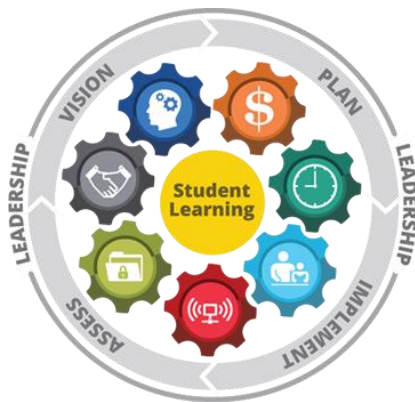
Rooted deeply in best practice research and focus groups with education technology experts, the dashboard is a proven model for implementing digital learning that combines educational technology with quality teaching.

At the heart of the dashboard is a framework for digital learning planning that places student learning at the center and is composed of seven major areas: curriculum, instruction, and assessment; professional learning; use of time; data and privacy; community partnerships; technology, networks, and hardware; and budget and resources.

The dashboard includes self-assessments for each of the seven areas to help districts determine their readiness to undergo a digital transformation, create a vision for student learning, and evaluate what aspects of the system must be addressed to reach it. Through the dashboard, districts can access research-based strategies to address gaps, gather input from school personnel, and evaluate progress over time.

“The Future Ready Interactive Planning Dashboard will help school districts move their goals into actionable next steps and create schools with empowered teachers and leaders, students who take charge of their own learning, and parents who are engaged and informed,” Wise said. “The end result is a more personalized approach to teaching and learning that ensures that all students have the skills they need to succeed in college or a career.”

The Future Ready Interactive Planning Dashboard is available at <http://dashboard.futurereadyschools.org>.







## **NCLB BREAKING FREE?: Key U.S. Senators Announce “Significant Progress” in Bipartisan Negotiations**

On March 9, two key U.S. senators working on a rewrite of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), announced “significant progress” in their bipartisan negotiations and said they expected to consider legislation in the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) during the week of April 13.

“During the last several weeks, we have been working together to build the base for legislation to fix the problems with No Child Left Behind,” [said Senate HELP Committee Chairman Lamar Alexander \(R-TN\) and Patty Murray \(D-WA\), the committee’s top Democrat.](#) “We are making significant progress in our negotiations. We are aiming to consider and markup legislation to fix the law during the week of April 13.”

The statement came as Republican leaders in the U.S. House of Representatives continue to seek support for the Student Success Act, their version of legislation to rewrite ESEA. Expected to pass the Student Success Act on February 27, House Republicans instead [pulled the bill from consideration](#) after statements from the Club for Growth and Heritage Foundation opposing the bill left conservative members wavering in their support. The bill is highly unlikely to receive any support from Democrats, meaning that House Republicans will need to pass the bill on their own.

On March 12, [Politico](#), citing a GOP House leadership source, reported that the Student Success Act “isn’t currently in the House’s legislative plans for the rest of March.” It noted that the House’s calendar is not final and could still include votes on additional bills, but said that the longer that the bill is delayed, the “more speculation that the bill won’t get a vote in the [House].”

The Student Success Act has already received a [veto threat from the White House](#), which said it “abdicates the historic federal role in elementary and secondary education of ensuring the educational progress of all of America’s students, including students from low-income families, students with disabilities, English learners, and students of color.”



## **OPTING OUT/OPTING IN: New ECS Report Examines State Assessment Opt-Out Policies**

A recent report from the Education Commission of the States (ECS) offers new insight into the debate about whether students can choose not to take a state’s tests.

The report, *Assessment Opt-Out Policies: State Responses to Parent Pushback*, examines the disparate policies and varying levels of flexibility states grant students to “opt out” of tests. “Determining whether states allow assessment opt-outs can be complex and is constantly evolving,” according to the report. While “[s]ome state policies are clear on this issue,” the report explains, “many are still working through the process.”

Some states, such as California and Utah, have explicit laws that allow parents to withhold their children from state assessments for any reason. State laws in Oregon and Pennsylvania, meanwhile, allow students to opt out of state tests for religious reasons. Currently, state legislatures in New Jersey and North Dakota are considering bills that would allow students to opt out of the state tests. (Similar legislation in Mississippi failed in committee.) **Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal (R)** recently issued an executive order that could allow students to opt out of the state tests as well.

On the other end of the spectrum, Arkansas state law mandates that all students participate in the state testing program. Similarly, Texas law stipulates that parents may not remove their children from school to avoid a test.

While some state laws clearly allow or prohibit students from opting out of tests, most schools and districts rely on guidance from their departments and state boards of education to clarify the issue, according to the ECS report. This strategy can prove problematic, though, since the level of guidance available varies by state as “many departments of education are often silent on the issue,” the report says.

In several states, including New Jersey, South Carolina, Iowa, Illinois, and Kentucky, state departments of education have issued district guidance prohibiting students from opting out of tests or mandating that students complete them, often citing accountability provisions in state law and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to support their stance. The Ohio Department of Education even issued guidance outlining the potential consequences students would face if they did not take the state assessment, including possible grade retention or impacts on graduation.

Although Michigan’s department of education discourages student opt-outs, it does not expressly prohibit the practice. The Minnesota Department of Education expects students to participate in the state testing program but indicated that it will not enforce any consequences or withhold diplomas from students who opt out. The Idaho Department of Education, meanwhile, allows districts to set their own policies.

The ECS report comes at a time when many districts are experiencing increased [parental resistance](#) to standardized testing and amid recent [media reports](#) of students walking out of schools on test day in protest. However, in a recent [post](#) for the Alliance for Excellent Education’s “High School Soup” blog, **Robert Rothman, senior fellow at the Alliance**, explains why he chose to “opt in” and have his daughter participate in a new test this month, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). PARCC tests are aligned with the Common Core State Standards.

“The PARCC test is different,” Rothman explains, because it emphasizes deeper learning competencies that engage students’ critical thinking and reasoning skills to solve complex problems. “Those are the kinds of competencies I want my daughter to be able to demonstrate,” he adds.

Instead of opting out of state tests, which provide schools and parents with valuable information about student learning, Rothman encourages parents to advocate for policies that evaluate

schools based on multiple measures, instead of on test scores alone. “As long as test scores are the only measure of a school’s performance, schools have incentives to devote an inordinate amount of time to test prep and other measures to raise scores that have nothing to do with learning,” he writes.

*Assessment Opt-Out Policies: State Responses to Parent Pushback* is available at <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/17/68/11768.pdf>.



## **SAFEGUARING STUDENT DATA: Alliance Joins More than Thirty National Education Organizations to Support Ten Principles for Using and Safeguarding Students’ Personal Information**

Last week, the Alliance for Excellent Education joined more than thirty national education organizations in announcing its support for the “Principles for Using and Safeguarding Students’ Personal Information.” These ten principles are a first-ever effort by major national education associations to articulate commonly held principles that should guide the use and protections of student information.

“When learning data is used in a meaningful way it can personalize and improve education for students,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education**. “But we must also adequately protect private information used to reach that goal. These student data principles are an excellent way to help balance those interests.”

The principles were developed by the Data Quality Campaign and Consortium for School Networking in partnership with the supporting organizations which represent parents, teachers, principals, superintendents, state boards of education, chief technology officers, and many others. The principles are intended to articulate the education community’s core beliefs and demonstrate a commitment to building transparency and trust. They emphasize that safeguarding data requires more than just compliance with the law; it requires building a culture of privacy at all levels.

A detailed description of all ten principles and a list of the supporting organizations, are available at [studentdatapinciples.org](http://studentdatapinciples.org).

***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; Kristen Loschert; 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)).