



# Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **SO YOU'RE TELLING ME THERE'S A CHANCE: House and Senate Education Leaders Express Confidence That Differences Between Competing Bills to Rewrite NCLB Can Be Resolved**

Last month, the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate each passed bills to rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). On July 30, key education leaders from the House and Senate met to begin discussions on a House-Senate conference committee. In a [release issued after the meeting](#), all parties expressed confidence that they could bridge differences between the two bills and agree on a single bill that is acceptable to the House, Senate, and the White House, which has raised concerns with both bills.

“There is a lot of work to do in the coming months, and I am confident we will be able to craft a bicameral education bill that reduces the federal role, restores local control, and empowers parents and education leaders,” said **House Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline (R-MN)**, who will likely chair the House-Senate committee. “Those are the kind of education reforms the American people expect and we must deliver. I look forward to continuing this important effort and putting in place new policies that will help every child in every school receive an excellent education.”

In addition to Kline, the meeting included **Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN)**, and top Democrats from the two committees, **Senator Patty Murray (D-WA)**, and **Representative Bobby Scott (D-VA)**.

Alexander noted that the underlying premise for both bills is the same: “Continue the law’s important measurements of academic progress of students but restore to states, school districts, classroom teachers and parents the responsibility for deciding what to do about improving student achievement.”

Alexander is focused on providing states and school districts with great flexibility on when, where, and how to intervene. Democrats, including Scott, however, would prefer providing flexibility about types of intervention while requiring action when it comes to intervening in low-performing schools and supporting students from low-income families, students of color, and other traditionally underserved students.

“The right to educational opportunity knows no state boundaries, and federal law must protect this right for all students regardless of race, income, disability, or language status,” Scott said. “I am confident that working together, we will produce a comprehensive reauthorization that fulfills the ESEA’s original civil rights legacy. I stand committed to producing a bipartisan bill that eliminates resource inequities and effectively addresses achievement gaps.”



## **CLOSING THE “HOMEWORK GAP”: New Federal Initiatives Aim to Increase Internet Connections in Homes of Low-Income Families**

Last December, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted to increase funding for the federal E-rate program by \$1.5 billion annually to improve internet access in U.S. schools and libraries. The decision is expected to expand high-speed Wi-Fi access to 43.5 million additional students, more than 101,000 additional schools, and nearly 16,000 additional libraries. That’s great news, but what happens when students are not in school?

According to data cited in a [report issued last fall by the Alliance for Excellent Education and the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education \(SCOPE\)](#), students from low-income families and students of color are noticeably less likely to own computers and use the internet than their peers. Because of their students’ lack of access, teachers in high-poverty schools were more than twice as likely (56 percent versus 21 percent) to say that their students’ lack of access to technology was a challenge in their classrooms. More dramatically, only 3 percent of teachers in high-poverty schools said that their students have the digital tools necessary to complete homework assignments, compared to 52 percent of teachers in more affluent schools.

Closing this so-called “homework gap”—in which some students can access assignments and supplementary learning outside of school hours while others cannot—is the goal of two new federal efforts currently underway.

The first is through the FCC’s Lifeline program, which served more than 12 million households last year and provides monthly telephone service discounts for low-income families to assist them in finding jobs, accessing health care services, and supporting their families. On June 18, the FCC proposed modernizing the Lifeline program by better supporting twenty-first-century communications such as discounted broadband service for eligible families.

“We all agree that we have entered the broadband era—except Lifeline has not,” [said FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler](#). “The transformation from a voice-based service to a broadband-based service is key to Lifeline’s future.”

In a [statement](#), **FCC Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel** said that 5 million out of the nation’s 29 million households with school-aged children lack access to broadband. She described how students in Citronelle, Alabama, head to McDonald’s after school to access the restaurant’s free Wi-Fi. “Students who do not have broadband at home hunker down in booths to do their homework, Rosenworcel said. “They research and write their papers with fizzy drinks and a side of fries.”

The second initiative, “ConnectHome,” was announced by President Obama on July 15 and is a joint initiative between communities, the private sector, and the federal government to expand high-speed broadband to more than 275,000 low-income households—and nearly 200,000 children. The pilot program is launching in twenty-seven cities and one tribal nation. According to a [White House fact sheet](#), internet service providers, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector will offer broadband access, technical training, digital literacy programs, and devices for residents in assisted housing units.

“While high-speed internet access is a given, it’s assumed for millions of Americans, it’s still out of reach for too many people—especially in low-income and rural communities,” Obama said in [remarks at Durant High School in Durant, Oklahoma](#). “More than 90 percent of households headed by a college graduate use the internet. Fewer than half of households with less than a high school education are plugged into the internet. So, in other words, the people who could benefit the most from the latest technology are the least likely to have it.”

[In an article for the \*Hechinger Report\*](#), reporter **Nichole Dobo** notes that the idea of providing free or low-cost broadband to families in public housing projects is simple, but actually implementing it is much more difficult. She writes that schools have tried to provide students with internet connections at home, but often face difficulties enrolling families, maintaining the connections, and delivering internet speeds that are fast enough.

Regarding the ConnectHome initiative, Dobo writes that several of the low-cost internet-access plans listed in the announcement are “already available” and “have restrictions—such as requirements that families do not have existing service or past-due bills—that can make it difficult ... to obtain a connection with the special price.”



### **TEACHER QUALITY GAPS: New Studies Reveal Wide Disparities in Student Access to High-Quality Teachers**

Two recent research reports—one focused on Washington state and one focused on the nation as a whole—document significant gaps in the access different student groups have to high-quality teachers. The first study, published in the journal of the American Educational Research Association *Educational Researcher*, finds that students of color, students from low-income families, and students with the greatest academic needs receive the least qualified teachers in Washington state. In a separate study, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) documents the variations in teacher quality between academic subjects.

In the *Educational Researcher* study, researchers find “that in elementary school, middle school, and high school classrooms, virtually every measure of teacher quality we examine—experience, licensure exam scores, and value added—is inequitably distributed across every indicator of student disadvantage—free/reduced-price lunch status, underrepresented minority, and low prior academic performance. ... [D]isadvantaged students (regardless of definition) are more likely to have a low-quality teacher (regardless of definition) than are nondisadvantaged students in the same grade level.”

Furthermore, the gaps in access to high-quality teachers are, on average, even larger between traditionally underserved students and their peers than the gaps for exposure to low-quality teachers. So while “disadvantaged students may be more likely to be taught by a low-quality teacher ... they are even less likely to be taught by a high-quality teacher,” the study says.

The study, *Uneven Playing Field? Assessing the Teacher Quality Gap Between Advantaged and Disadvantaged Students*, defines “low-quality” teachers as

- those with two or fewer years of experience (“novice teachers”);
- those who scored in the lowest 10 percent on the Washington Educator Test—Basic (WEST—B), the state test prospective educators must pass before enrolling in a teacher preparation program; and
- those whose value-added estimates place them in the bottom 10 percent of teachers statewide for effectiveness.

By contrast, “high-quality” teachers have more than ten years of experience or rank in the top 10 percent of teachers statewide with their WEST—B scores or on the researchers’ estimates of teacher effectiveness.

The greatest teacher quality gaps exist in middle schools, according to the study. Among seventh-grade math students, more than 19 percent of those who scored in the lowest quartile on the state test (i.e., those with the greatest academic needs) were taught by teachers who ranked in the bottom 10 percent of teachers statewide for effectiveness. By contrast, only 7 percent of students who earned top scores on Washington’s state test were taught by teachers in the least effective category. Similarly, middle school students of color attended classes taught by the least experienced teachers. The average seventh-grade math teacher for a student of color had 1.75 *fewer* years of experience than the average seventh-grade math teacher for a white student, according to the study.

### **Why Teacher Quality Gaps Exist**

In addition to determining the severity of teacher quality gaps, the researchers analyzed patterns of teacher sorting at the district, school, and classroom levels to determine the sources of those inequities. They find that most inequity “comes from teacher sorting across districts and schools as opposed to sorting of teachers across classrooms in schools,” the study says.

Furthermore, districts with the highest concentrations of traditionally underserved students have the greatest disparities in the distribution of low-quality teachers among student subgroups. For instance, in districts with the highest concentrations of poverty, fourth graders eligible for free or reduced-price lunch are 2.4 percentage points more likely to have a novice teacher than are students from the same district who do not qualify for the lunch program. Similarly, in districts with the highest concentrations of students of color, African American, Latino, and American Indian students are 3.37 percentage points more likely than their white peers to receive a less effective teacher.

At the middle school level specifically, though, the greatest inequities in teacher quality exist between schools and between classrooms, rather than solely between districts. Seventh-grade students of color and students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch are more likely than affluent white students to attend schools with higher percentages of novice teachers. Similarly, *within* schools, seventh graders with the lowest performance on the annual state math and reading assessments are more likely to have the least effective teachers.

“This suggests that low-performing seventh graders may be disproportionately ‘tracked’ into classrooms with previously ineffective teachers,” the *Uneven Playing Field?* study says.

Patterns in teacher retention, hiring, and transfers may contribute to the inequitable distribution of low- and high-quality teachers between districts and between schools, the study says. Additionally, “in schools that ‘track’ students by performance level, the inequities we observe [between classrooms] (particularly at the middle school level) could be due in part to more qualified teachers being assigned to teach more ‘advanced’ courses,” the study says.

## **Understanding Teacher Quality Gaps Between Subjects**

*Uneven Playing Field?* reveals how teacher quality varies between classrooms, schools, and districts, and exposes the teacher quality gaps that exist between student subgroups. Meanwhile, the NCES study finds that teacher quality likewise varies considerably between academic subjects.

The NCES report, *Education and Certification Qualifications of Departmentalized Public High School-Level Teachers of Selected Subjects: Evidence from the 2011–12 Schools and Staffing Survey*, examines the percentage of high school teachers who hold majors and state certifications in the subjects they teach.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the current reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, requires all teachers in core academic subjects to be “highly qualified,” which the law defines as having a bachelor’s degree and full state certification in each core academic subject they teach. Using that definition as a guide, the NCES study examines the extent to which high school teachers had in-field qualifications and the extent to which students and classes were taught by teachers with those qualifications during School Year 2011–12. The study examines the distribution in eleven broad subject areas, ranging from English and math to foreign languages and the fine arts, as well as nine additional subfields within science and social science, including chemistry, biology, geography, and history.

The study finds that the majority of high school teachers in the eleven broad subject areas, with the exception of Latin, held both a postsecondary degree and teaching certificate in the primary subject they taught. Furthermore, within the eleven broad subject areas, the NCES study finds that the majority of students in grades 9–12 took classes taught by teachers with both qualifications, with the exception of German, Latin, and dance/drama or theater classes.

However, a closer look at the individual broad subjects and subfields reveals striking differences in the distribution of highly-qualified teachers between subject areas. On the high end, 85 percent of ninth through twelfth graders took music classes taught by teachers with both a college degree and state certification in music. The broad subject area of science ranked second highest, with 72 percent of students taking classes taught by a highly-qualified teacher. Yet, among the subfields within science, the percentages are less encouraging. While 62 percent of students studied biology/life sciences with a highly-qualified teacher, only 28 percent of physics students and 23 percent of earth science students took classes taught by teachers who possessed both a college degree and state certification in their respective science areas.

Similarly, in the broad category of social science, nearly 68 percent of ninth- through twelfth-grade students studied with highly-qualified teachers. In history specifically, though, only 23 percent of high school students attended classes taught by teachers with both a college degree and state certification in the subject. By comparison, nearly 69 percent of English students and almost 62 percent of math students took classes taught by highly-qualified teachers.

While, on average, the majority of high school teachers are “highly qualified” by NCLB standards, the NCES study shows that major discrepancies still exist in teacher qualifications between subjects. Furthermore, the NCES study does not link teacher qualifications with student outcomes or examine the distribution of highly-qualified teachers among subgroups of students. And, as the study on Washington state shows, significant disparities remain in the distribution of those highly-qualified teachers between classrooms, schools, and districts.

*Uneven Playing Field? Assessing the Teacher Quality Gap Between Advantaged and Disadvantaged Students* is available at <http://edr.sagepub.com/content/44/5/293.full.pdf>.

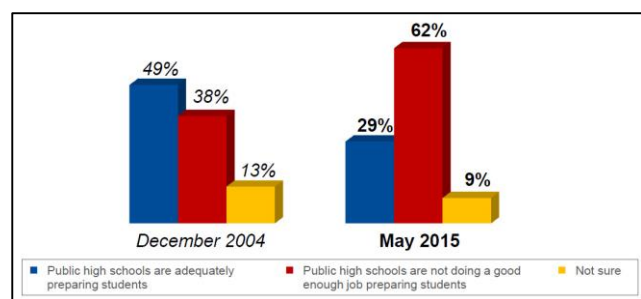
*Education and Certification Qualifications of Departmentalized Public High School-Level Teachers of Selected Subjects: Evidence from the 2011–12 Schools and Staffing Survey* is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015814.pdf>.



### **(NOT) RISING TO THE CHALLENGE: Recent High School Graduates Not Prepared for Rigors of College or Work, According to New Achieve Survey Findings**

More than three-quarters of college faculty and over 60 percent of employers reported that public high schools are not preparing students for the expectations they will face in college and the workforce, according to survey results in *Rising to the Challenge: Views on High School Graduates’ Preparedness for College and Careers*, a new report by Achieve. These percentages are dramatically higher than similar survey findings that Achieve conducted in 2004.

As shown in the graph to the right, nearly half of employers in 2004 felt public high schools were adequately preparing students for the expectations of the work world. In 2015, that percentage fell to 29 percent while the percentage saying that public high schools were not doing a good enough job increased by 24 percentage points. Among college instructors, 78 percent said public high schools are not doing a good enough job in 2015, compared to 65 percent in 2004.



The survey comes on the heels of Achieve’s [December 2014 survey](#) in which 49 percent of college students reported “large gaps” in their preparedness in one or more subject areas.

“Employers and college instructors are affirming what recent graduates themselves have told us; the expectations of high schools do not line up with the expectations of postsecondary education and the working world,” said **Michael Cohen, president of Achieve**. “Nearly half of recent high

school grads reported that they weren't fully prepared for their next steps, and even higher percentages of faculty and employers agree with them. We are hearing time and again that too many students with high school diplomas, who are told that they have met the requirements to move onto their next steps, are simply not adequately prepared to succeed in college or in a job."

According to the survey results, 96 percent of instructors at two-year colleges and 88 percent of instructors at four-year colleges reported at least some gaps in their students' preparation. Additionally, 82 percent of employers reported at least some gaps in recent high school students' preparation for work, including 48 percent who reported large gaps.

When asked about their students' specific skills, college instructors said that their high schools are preparing most students in computers and technology, teamwork, and verbal communication, but more than 75 percent said they are dissatisfied with their students' preparedness in critical thinking, comprehension of complicated materials, work and study habits, writing, written communication, and problem solving.

"We hear students saying that they are certain they would have worked harder in high school if they'd been held to higher expectations," said Cohen. "It's critical that schools clearly communicate the expectations of colleges and employers early in a student's high school experience and help them to understand the coursework they will need to complete. When we set rigorous expectations, students can and will rise to the challenge."

*Rising to the Challenge: Views on High School Graduates' Preparedness for College and Careers* is available at <http://www.achieve.org/files/AchieveSurveyIIPowerPoint.pdf>.

	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>A Summer Postcard from the Alliance for Excellent Education</b></p> <p>Dear <i>Straight A's</i> Reader:</p> <p>With schools around the country out for summer and the U.S. Congress entering its August recess, the Alliance newsletter—although not the Alliance staff—will be taking a brief summer vacation.</p> <p>The next issue of <i>Straight A's</i> will be on September 14. In the meantime, please follow the Alliance on Twitter at <a href="http://www.twitter.com/all4ed">www.twitter.com/all4ed</a> and visit the Alliance's "<a href="http://www.all4ed.org">High School Soup</a>" blog for the latest education news. Also, keep an eye on the Alliance's website for upcoming webinars at <a href="http://all4ed.org/webinars">http://all4ed.org/webinars</a>.</p>
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***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; 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](http://www.twitter.com/all4ed)), Facebook ([www.facebook.com/all4ed](http://www.facebook.com/all4ed)), and the Alliance's "High School Soup" blog ([www.all4ed.org/blog](http://www.all4ed.org/blog)).