



# Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **PASSING THE TORCH: U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan Announces Resignation, Former New York Education Commissioner John King to Succeed Him**

On October 2, **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** announced that he will step down at the end of December. **John King, delegated Deputy Secretary of Education of the U.S. Department of Education (ED)**, will replace Duncan and will serve as acting Education Secretary for the remainder of the Obama administration.

“Arne has done more to bring our educational system—sometimes kicking and screaming—into the twenty-first century than anybody else,” [Obama said](#) in an October 2 appearance at the White House with Duncan and King. “America is going to be better off for what he has done. It’s going to be more competitive and more prosperous. It is going to be more equal and more upwardly mobile. It’s a record that I truly believe no other Education Secretary can match.”

In discussing Duncan’s record, Obama noted that Duncan and his team have “delivered some incredible results at every stage of the educational experience.” Specifically, Obama referenced that more than thirty states have “upped their investment” in early childhood education and that nearly every state has raised its standards for teaching and learning. He also noted that the U.S. high school graduation rate is at an all-time high while more Americans are graduating from college than ever before.

“Arne bleeds this stuff,” Obama said. “He cares so much about our kids. And he’s been so passionate about this work. Everybody who interacts with him, including people who disagree with him on some issues, never questions the genuineness and heart that he has brought to this job.”

Admitting that he “cried more” on October 2 than he had in a while, Duncan said he was stepping down to spend more time with his family after commuting between Chicago and Washington, DC, for the last several months.

“Serving the President in the work of expanding opportunity for students throughout this country has been the greatest honor of my life. Doing so alongside people of the brilliance, ability and moral conviction of the team here at ED has been nothing short of thrilling,” Duncan wrote in an [email to ED staff](#). “It’s with real sadness that I have come to recognize that being apart from my family has become too much of a strain, and it is time for me to step aside and give a new leader a chance.”

That new leader will be John King, who oversees all preschool-through-grade-twelve education policies, programs and strategic initiatives, as well as the operations of ED.

“He’s been an educator all his life—a teacher, a principal, a leader of schools, the New York State’s education chief,” Obama said. “He shares our commitment to preparing every child for success in a more innovative and competitive world.”

In his appearance with Duncan and Obama, King, who lost both parents before turning thirteen, said New York City public school teachers are the reason he is alive. “They are the reason that I became a teacher,” King said. “They are the reason I am standing here today. Those teachers created amazing educational experiences, but also gave me hope—hope about what is possible, what could be possible for me in life.”

In an [op-ed for the \*Hechinger Report\*](#), **Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise** writes that Obama “doubled down on his commitment to the nation’s underserved students” by selecting King. “Clearly, this administration has no plans of backing away over the next fifteen months from the aggressive education reform agenda it began pursuing six years ago.”

Wise notes that King “pushed an aggressive state agenda of Common Core State Standards, more rigorous assessments, teacher evaluations, charter schools, and other education reforms” during his tenure as New York’s education commissioner. Wise expects King to continue advancing the Obama administration’s agenda, including opposing sequestration cuts to education programs, unveiling regulations to measure and improve the quality of teacher preparation programs, and pursuing new policy to address the school-to-prison pipeline.

“[King’s] dedicated heart comes to this new position encased in a body bearing numerous battle scars,” Wise writes. “His previous experience as commissioner of education for the state of New York will serve him well in the legislative wrestling ring that has been made of the nation’s capital.”



### **CLOSING THE “HOMEWORK GAP”: Nearly 200 School District Superintendents Urge FCC to Modernize Lifeline Program**

Nearly 200 school district superintendents urged the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to modernize the Lifeline program in an attempt to help close the “homework gap,” through a letter organized by the Alliance for Excellent Education and the Leading Education by Advancing Digital (LEAD) Commission. The district leaders asked that Lifeline—which served more than 12 million households last year with discounted monthly telephone service—provide affordable, high-quality broadband service for low-income families so that students are able to access the internet at home.

The absence of internet service at home creates a divide between students who are able to access assignments and engage in supplementary learning outside of schools hours, and those who do not have the same capability. This “homework gap” could be remedied through the modernization of the Lifeline program. With telephone service alone, the program assists families in finding jobs, accessing health care services and providing general support. With the inclusion of broadband service, the program would aid students in their education and bring the power of technology home to combat the nation’s persistent achievement gap.

“Having access to broadband internet at home will increase connectivity and opportunities for those who play vital roles in the lives of students outside the classroom—parents, guardians, other relatives, and community members,” the letter reads. “Lifeline support for broadband service, including wireline and wireless services, will create communities of lifelong learners and support systems that can further raise achievement and success throughout the country.”

The superintendents’ voices join others who have called for modernization of Lifeline, including **FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler**, who said in a [recent statement](#), “We all agree that we have entered the broadband era—except Lifeline has not. The transformation from a voice-based service to a broadband-based service is key to Lifeline’s future.” In addition, **FCC Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel** noted that 5 million out of the nation’s 29 million households with school-aged children lack access to broadband.

**FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn** also [supports Lifeline reform](#). “For broadband to reach its fullest potential, to improve the lives of every American, it must be both affordable and ubiquitous—if it is not, it will become just another barrier that separates the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’... the program should be focused on being part of a pathway out of poverty, poor education, lackluster healthcare options, and more.”

**Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise** says modernizing the Lifeline program is a “critical step” in closing the “homework gap” and producing high school graduates with twenty-first-century skills and competencies. “With the inclusion of discounted broadband service, the FCC can prepare the nation’s students to compete in an increasingly global workforce,” Wise said.

A coalition of more than 140 religious, civil rights, seniors, disability, technology, and veteran groups also [submitted a letter to the FCC](#) in support of Lifeline modernization. The letter touched on the necessity of internet access in the home as it applies to education. “Broadband is essential for anyone who goes to school or seeks to further enhance their skills,” the letter reads. “Seven in ten teachers assign homework that requires the internet and yet 5 million households with children don’t have home access, leading to a ‘homework gap.’”

The superintendents’ letter to the FCC is available at [http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/LifelineSupportLetter\\_SchoolLeaders.pdf](http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/LifelineSupportLetter_SchoolLeaders.pdf).



### **OPENING DOORS AND CLOSING GAPS: Study Finds That Objective Measures of Student Performance Boost Access to Advanced Math for Traditionally Underserved Students**

According to recent [research](#), students of color and those from low-income families typically have less access than their white peers to rigorous and advanced course work, even within the same school. But policies that place students in advanced courses based on test scores and other standardized measures of academic performance, rather than subjective criteria such as teacher recommendations, potentially can reduce the role that income and race often play in assigning students to upper-level classes.

That finding appears in a new study from the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), *Early Math Coursework and College Readiness: Evidence from Targeted Middle School Math*

*Acceleration.* The study examines the impact of a targeted enrollment strategy used in North Carolina’s Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) to identify incoming middle school students capable of succeeding in eighth-grade algebra. The WCPSS process analyzes a student’s prior test scores to predict the likelihood that he or she will pass the state’s standardized end-of-course algebra test. Students whose predicted probability of success exceeds 70 percent enroll in an accelerated math track that enables them to complete algebra in eighth grade. All other students pursue course work leading to algebra in ninth grade.

District leaders implemented the new policy in School Year 2010–11 hoping it would boost overall enrollment in eighth-grade algebra and also provide more equitable access, particularly for students of color and those from low-income families. After just two years, the percentage of middle school students enrolled in accelerated math courses rose from 40 percent to almost 70 percent, according to the NBER study. Furthermore, the access gap that previously existed between students of color, students from low-income families, and affluent white students with comparable academic skills shrank substantially. The access gap between students from low-income and affluent families decreased by two-thirds and “there was no statistically significant racial gap,” the study says. “Black and white students in the same school, same grade and of the same academic skill therefore appear to have equal exposure to accelerated math coursework [sic].”

The new policy increased by 26 percentage points the rates at which African American and Latino students with comparable academic skills participated in accelerated math classes, according to the NBER study. But the policy did not narrow the achievement gap between students of color, students from low-income families, and their affluent white peers. African Americans, Latinos, and students from low-income families remained substantially more likely to fall in the bottom quarter of students based on academic skills, and consequently, represented a smaller percentage of the total population of students enrolled in accelerated math courses, the study says.

Although the new policy expanded students’ access to advanced math classes, it did not guarantee that students performed well in those courses or remained on the accelerated path, the study finds. Of the students who enrolled in accelerated math in seventh grade, only 59 percent progressed to algebra in eighth grade and only 40 percent progressed to geometry in ninth grade.

Persistence rates also varied considerably by income and race, according to the study. By ninth grade, 86 percent of affluent students remained on the accelerated track and enrolled in geometry, compared to only 20 percent of students from low-income families. Among students of color, only 34 percent of African American and Latino students progressed to ninth-grade geometry. Although roughly 95 percent of all students in the accelerated track passed their advanced math classes, the study finds that nearly all of them did so by earning Cs and Ds. That pattern holds true in both algebra and geometry and between racial and income groups. The study does not find any connections between participation in accelerated math classes and students’ later test scores.

“These results suggest targeted math acceleration has potential to increase college readiness among disadvantaged populations but that acceleration alone is insufficient to keep most students on such a track,” the study says. “The targeted acceleration rule did substantially increase the

proportion of students, including black and Hispanic students, enrolled in the college-readiness math track at the start of high school. It remains to be seen whether this will translate into subsequent educational and economic success or whether the observed leakages fully diminish the policy's impacts."

*Early Math Coursework and College Readiness: Evidence from Targeted Middle School Math Acceleration* is available at <http://www.nber.org/papers/w21395>.



## **CONTENT MATTERS: Unequal Access to Rigorous Content Is Contributing to the Widening Achievement Gap in America's Schools**

Findings from a new study indicate that unequal access to rigorous math content is furthering the divide between low-income students and their higher-income peers. According to "The Role of Schooling in Perpetuating Educational Inequality: An International Perspective," conducted by the American Educational Research Association (AERA), students from low-income families are more likely to be exposed to weaker math content in schools, and this curricular inequality is contributing to the persistent achievement gap between low- and high-income students, both in the United States and abroad.

Conducted using data from the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the study explores the relationship between students' opportunities to learn—which is driven by the course content they receive and their socioeconomic status—and their performance in math.

The results from study show that in the United States, more than one-third of the social class-related gap in student performance on the math literacy test was associated with unequal access to rigorous content. The other two-thirds of the gap were associated directly with students' family and community backgrounds.

"Our findings support previous research by showing that affluent students are consistently provided with greater opportunity to learn more rigorous content, and that students who are exposed to higher-level math have a better ability to apply it to addressing real-world situations of contemporary adult life, such as calculating interest, discounts, and estimating the required amount of carpeting for a room," said **William H. Schmidt, a professor of statistics and education at Michigan State University** and one of the study's authors. "But now we know just how important content inequality is in contributing to performance gaps between privileged and underprivileged students."

The study explains that methods such as tracking contribute to unequal access and create greater "within-school inequalities" in content coverage. Tracking separates students into less or more rigorous courses, often based on incorrect perceptions of a student's ability to learn that are driven by a student's appearance or background. The report cites other research describing how students from low-income families are often routed into classes with lower time on task and weaker instruction, damaging students' opportunity to learn and adding to educational inequality.

"There's a certain amount of tracking that still goes on," Schmidt [told The Washington Post](#). "A lot of it is what I call shell games. If you look at transcripts, you'll see a school offers ten

different kinds of Algebra classes—Algebra 1, Algebra A, B, and C and so on. And a parent thinks, ‘Oh, my kid is doing fine, he’s taking Algebra.’ But upon closer examination, that student is getting something different. And it’s showing up in our analysis quite strongly.”

As shown in the table to the right from the study, the United States ranks eleventh among the thirty-three OECD-participating countries with 37 percent of total socioeconomic inequality contributed by unequal access to rigorous mathematics. Another author of the study, **Nathan Burroughs, a senior research associate at Michigan State University**, explained that the results of the research have implications for school officials, since content exposure is more subject to school policies than socioeconomic conditions.

Rank	Country	Percentage Contributed
1	Netherlands	58%
2	Korea	56%
3	Australia	52%
4	Austria	47%
	United Kingdom	47%
6	Belgium	43%
7	Germany	43%
8	Japan	43%
9	Spain	42%
10	New Zealand	40%
11	Canada	37%
	United States	37%

In the *Washington Post* article, Schmidt names the Common Core State Standards as a possible solution, but he says the key to their success is how the standards are applied to the classroom and ensuring that all students receive the same content, especially in middle and high school, when he says that grouping by ability is most prevalent. “Almost 40 percent of social class inequality is coming through schooling,” he says in the article, “If we can just figure out policies that can eliminate that, we can lessen (inequality) by 40 percent. That’s one big thing we can do about it.”

“The Role of Schooling in Perpetuating Educational Inequality” is available at <http://bit.ly/1R18uiY>.



### **MONEY MATTERS: Higher Levels of School Spending Can Improve Students’ Long-Term Outcomes, According to *Education Next* Study**

Recent [reports](#) have highlighted the widening gap in local and state funding between poor and affluent school districts. Not only do the poorest school districts receive less money, the funding they do receive is insufficient to address the additional educational needs of students from low-income families, many of whom start school academically behind their more affluent peers, according to recent [analyses](#). But does more money actually impact students’ educational outcomes? According to a recent study featured in *Education Next*, it does.

“[W]hen examined in the right way, it becomes clear that increased school spending is linked to improved outcomes for students, and for low-income students in particular,” according to “Boosting Educational Attainment and Adult Earnings: Does School Spending Matter After All?”

For the study, researchers examined school districts that received additional funding as a result of school-finance reforms (SFRs) mandated by their states’ supreme courts. “SFRs that began in the early 1970s and accelerated in the 1980s caused some of the most dramatic changes in the structure of K–12 education spending in U.S. history,” the article says. “[And such reforms] were in fact successful at reducing the spending gaps between previously low- and high-spending districts.”



To determine what impact these additional funds had on student outcomes, the researchers first isolated the spending changes they predicted a district would experience from the SFR alone. Then they compared cohorts of students within the same district who attended school before and after the implementation of the SFR to determine what effect, if any, the additional funds had on students' long-term outcomes, including educational attainment, high school completion, adult wages and family income, and incidence of adult poverty.

The study shows that students exposed to more years of higher district spending (1) completed more schooling, (2) were more likely to graduate from high school, and (3) had higher wages and total family income as adults than students from the same district who attended school for fewer years after the SFR or who attended school before district spending increased.

Furthermore, students from low-income families, those whose annual family income dipped below two times the federal poverty line at any point during their childhood, experienced the greatest positive impacts. Students from low-income families who experienced a 10 percent increase in per-pupil district spending during all twelve school years completed one-half of a year more in schooling than students who did not attend school during the spending increase, the study finds. Similarly, that same 10 percent funding boost increased the probability of high school graduation by 10 percentage points for students from low-income families. The sustained 10 percent funding increase also boosted adult hourly wages for students from low-income families by 13 percent and their total adult family income by 17 percent, the study finds.

The study notes that extra money alone, though, is not enough to ensure these outcomes. How districts spend additional resources matters as well, so the researchers also examined how districts allocated the additional money received from the SFR. The study finds that districts were more likely to spend additional SFR money on instruction and support services, including lengthening the school year and reducing class sizes, which “may help explain the large, positive effects for students from low-income families,” the study says.

“Money alone may not lift educational outcomes to desired levels, but our findings confirm that the provision of adequate funding may be critical,” the article continues. “Importantly, we also find that how the money is spent matters. Therefore, to be most effective, spending increases should be coupled with systems that help ensure spending is allocated toward the most productive uses.”

“Boosting Educational Attainment and Adult Earnings” is available at <http://educationnext.org/boosting-education-attainment-adult-earnings-school-spending/>.

***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; Caroline Waldman; 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)).