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Public Education Policy And Progress



PROGRESS IS NO ACCIDENT: Number of Annual High School Dropouts Falls by 250,000, New Report Finds

The number of high school dropouts decreased from 1 million in 2008 to approximately 750,000 in 2012, according to a new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education, America's Promise Alliance, Civic Enterprises, and Everyone Graduates Center. *Progress Is No Accident: Why ESEA Can't Backtrack on High School Graduation Rates* also finds that the number of “dropout factories”—high schools where less than 60 percent of students make it to their senior year—declined from 2,007 in 2002 to 1,040 in 2014.

The report credits the improvement in high school graduation rates to state and local on-the-ground efforts, as well as federal requirements issued in 2008 and 2011 targeted at the dropout crisis—the same requirements that are absent from current efforts to rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

“Federal policy and local action are working; data and dedication are making diplomas,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**, “but with more than 4,000 students still dropping out per school day, now is not the time for the federal government to take its foot off the high school graduation rate pedal.”

In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) issued regulations that had a tremendously positive impact on the national high school graduation rate. In addition to requiring that states use the same, accurate calculation of the high school graduation rate, the regulations required states to set ambitious goals to improve graduation rates and required school districts to intervene in high schools where students from low-income families, students of color, and other traditionally underserved students had consistently low graduation rates. In 2011, ED issued further policy requirements mandating that states intervene in high schools with low graduation rates.

Since the 2008 regulations were issued, the national high school graduation rate increased from 74.7 percent to an all-time high of 80.9 percent and more than one-quarter of a million additional students nationwide received high school diplomas in 2012 compared to 2008.

Number of Students Not Graduating from High School in the United States Per Class



“From our work with scores of high schools and school districts over the past decade, it’s clear that graduation rate accountability made a huge difference,” said **Robert Balfanz, director of the Everyone Graduates Center**. “There was an absolute sea change in the behavior of principals and school districts when aggressively improving graduation rates came to matter and low-graduation-rate high schools became the focus of reform. The result was a large decline in the number of high schools where dropping out was the norm. These schools were typically attended only by students from low-income families and students of color, and hence, it is the nation’s most vulnerable students who have benefitted most from graduation rate accountability.”

“Every district and school we visit where graduation rates are rising, we hear a similar refrain: an every-student-counts culture with real accountability for progress over time,” says **John Bridgeland, chief executive officer of Civic Enterprises**. “This is a core element of the secret sauce to get to a 90 percent graduation rate for all.”

Were the nation to increase the high school graduation rate for just one high school class to 90 percent, the report notes, it would create as many as 65,700 new jobs and increase the national economy by as much as \$10.9 billion annually.

“High school graduates earn, on average, \$15,000 more annually than dropouts,” Wise said. “That’s great news for the individual graduates, but also for the economy, as additional earnings are not going under a mattress; they will be used to purchase automobiles, homes, groceries, clothing, and more, fueling state and local economies.”

Even with these gains, however, much more work remains. One out of five students still does not graduate from high school on time. Ensuring a steady gain in the national graduation rate means tackling the long-standing graduation rate gaps between white students and students of color and students from low-income families. According to the report, fifteen states have high school graduation rate gaps between African American and white students that are more than 15 percentage points. Twelve states have a gap of 15 percentage points or more between the graduation rates of white and Latino students.

Students of color and students from low-income families also disproportionately attend the more than 1,200 high schools nationwide that fail to graduate one-third or more of their students. For example, African American students make up less than 16 percent of the K–12 population nationwide, but 40 percent of the students in these low-graduation-rate high schools.

“Turning around schools that have struggled for years or even decades is some of the hardest work in all of education,” said **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan**, who participated in a press call about the report with Wise and Balfanz. “And to be clear, they are not improving fast enough, but I am proud of the gains we have seen and believe they point to more progress down the road. The [Alliance’s] paper reinforces that belief. Thanks to the hard work and deep commitment of our nation’s teachers and principals, we are headed in the right direction. But systemic inequities exist that shortchange students in high-poverty, high-minority schools across our country. We can and must do better.”

To preserve the graduation rate gains already made, while also increasing the graduation rates of students who have been traditionally underserved, the report calls on the U.S. Congress to build on the effective policies currently in place while rewriting ESEA to ensure that

- states are accountable for all high schools that fail to graduate one-third or more of their students;
- all high schools failing to graduate one-third or more of their students are eligible for federal funding and receive support to implement evidence-based, comprehensive reform; and
- any high school with a group of traditionally underserved students not meeting a state-set graduation rate goal for two or more years must take action with evidence-based reforms.

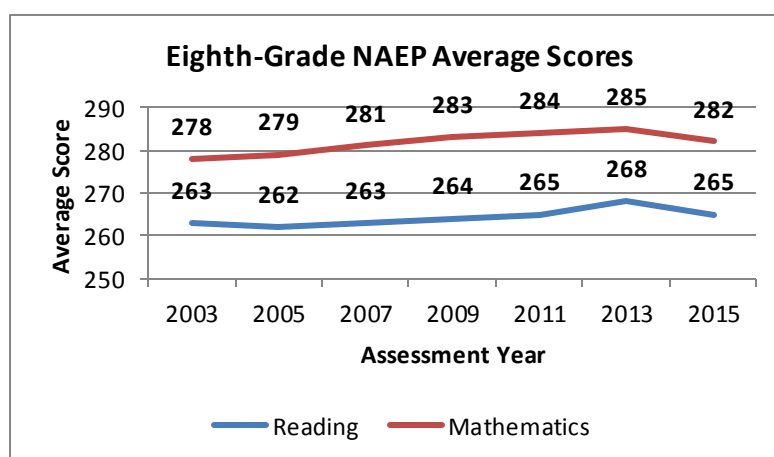
“To keep the momentum going, close the graduation gaps that still exist, and reach the GradNation campaign goal, state accountability systems must continue to be a priority,” said **John Gomperts, president and chief executive officer of America’s Promise**. “Recent gains in graduation rates show us that when states and schools are held accountable and students are given the support they need to stay in school and on track to graduation, real progress is possible.”

Progress Is No Accident: Why ESEA Can’t Backtrack on High School Graduation Rates is available at <http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/NoAccident/>.



NATION’S REPORT CARD: Reading and Math Scores Drop on National Assessment of Educational Progress

Achievement gaps between white students and students of color remained large—over 30 percentage points in some instances—and average eighth-grade reading and math scores declined according to the latest results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation’s Report Card. Released on October 28, NAEP results indicate that average fourth-grade math scores also dropped while fourth-grade reading scores were unchanged.



“One downturn does not a trend make, and that’s what we’re comfortable in saying about the data,” said **Peggy Carr, acting commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics**, which released the results. “We’re trying not to read too much into a decline at this point.”

Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise also preached caution in interpreting the results. “Using a single test to determine the success or failure of education reform movements

such as college- and career-ready standards is like checking only the windshield wipers during a vehicle inspection,” [he said in a statement](#). “The true value in the Nation’s Report Card is its status as the only national measure that permits comparisons across states and within various subgroups of students. The NAEP results will help policymakers and educators continue to understand the needs of all students and improve instruction that results in meaningful learning.”

Based on the results, there is still a lot of work to do. Nearly one-quarter (24 percent) of eighth graders performed below the basic level in reading, indicating that they likely struggle to identify statements of main idea, theme, or author’s purpose and make simple inferences from texts. In math, 29 percent of eighth graders performed below the basic level, suggesting that they likely struggle to complete problems correctly with the help of structural prompts such as diagrams, charts, and graphs, and probably cannot use fundamental algebraic and informal geometric concepts in problem solving.

The percentage of eighth graders scoring at the proficient level, which indicates a solid grasp of the subject matter, declined from 36 percent to 34 percent in reading and from 35 percent to 33 percent in math.

Among individual groups of students, there was no significant change in racial/ethnic score gaps for eighth-grade students in reading. Asian students posted the highest average score (281 on the 500-point scale), followed by white students (274), Hispanic students (253), American Indian/Alaska Native students (252), and black students (248). The 26-point difference in the average reading score for white students compared to black students has not narrowed significantly since 2005.

In eighth-grade math, white, black, and Hispanic students posted lower scores while scores for Asian students were unchanged. Again, Asian students had the highest average score (307), followed by white students (292), Hispanic students (270), American Indian/Alaska Native students (267), and black students (260). The 32-point difference between white students and black students has not changed since 2007. In four states/jurisdictions (District of Columbia, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Wisconsin), the difference in the average math scores between white and black students was 40 points or more. West Virginia, with a 16-point difference, was the only state with a white-black average score difference below 20 points.

At the state level, the average eighth-grade reading scores increased in only one state (West Virginia) while no states posted significant score gains in eighth-grade math. For fourth grade, average reading scores were higher in thirteen states/jurisdictions while average math scores were higher in the District of Columbia, Mississippi, and U.S. Department of Defense schools.

Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Minnesota had the highest average eighth-grade math scores while the District of Columbia, Alabama, and Louisiana posted the lowest. In reading, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Vermont had the highest eighth-grade reading scores while the District of Columbia, Mississippi, and New Mexico posted the lowest.

Among the twenty-one large urban school districts that participated in NAEP’s Trial Urban District Assessment, six improved their scores from 2013 for at least one grade and one subject.

Math scores increased in four urban districts and decreased in ten urban districts in at least one grade. Reading scores increased in five urban districts and decreased in three urban districts in at least one grade.

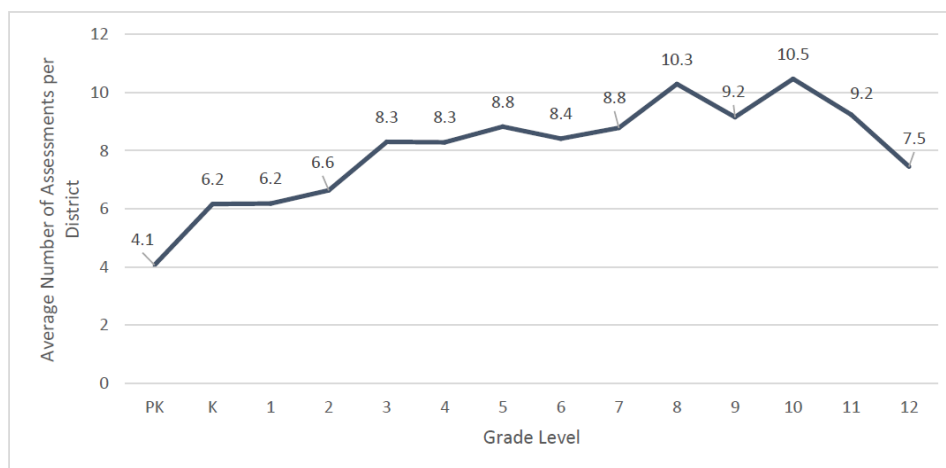
The complete results are available at <http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>.



TESTING OVERLOAD?: New Study Finds U.S. Students Are Spending Time Taking Redundant Tests

In schools across the country, students are spending time taking redundant tests that are often misaligned with college- and career-ready standards, according to a new report by the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS). The two-year study, *Student Testing in America's Great City Schools: An Inventory and Preliminary Analysis*, which the Council believes could be the “most comprehensive ever undertaken to ascertain the true extent of mandatory testing in the nation’s schools,” examines the frequency of testing, types and origins of assessments and requirements, and how the tests are used in public schools in sixty-six of the Council’s member school districts.

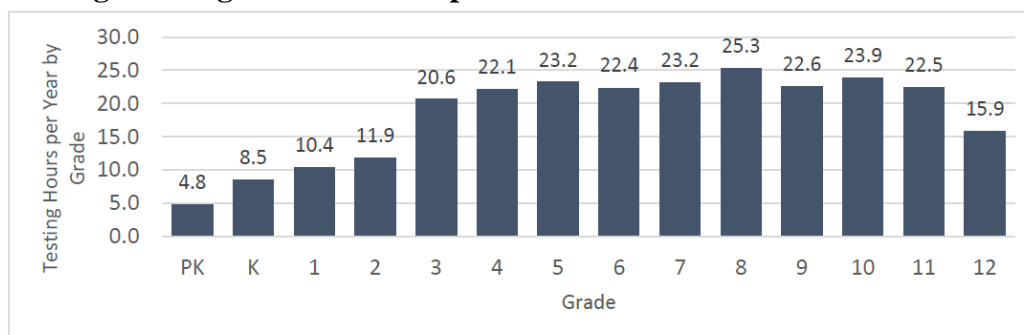
According to the report, the average student takes approximately 112 mandatory standardized tests from pre-kindergarten through high school graduation. In School Year (SY) 2014–15 alone, there were about 401 unique tests administered, and students sat for tests more than 6,570 times. The report finds some redundancy in the exams districts give, with students often taking multiple exams for districts to yield data by item, grade, subject, student, or school. In addition, the findings suggest that tests are not always aligned, do not assess mastery of any specific content, and do not match with college- or career-ready standards. The below chart of the average number of total assessments per district that are mandated for all students, by grade level, shows the largest numbers of tests are taken by children in grades 8 and 10.



Students typically take about eight standardized tests per year, consuming between 20 and 25 hours each school year, the report finds. As shown in the graph below, eighth-grade students spent approximately 25.3 hours, or 2.34 percent, of school time taking tests during SY 2014–15, which the report says may be a result of requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB),

combined with various science, writing, technology, end-of-course, high-school placement, and other required exams.

Average Testing Time in Hours per Year for Students at Each Grade Level



Even though tests are being administered to measure student progress, nearly 40 percent of districts reported having to wait between two and four months to see results at the school level, “thereby minimizing their utility for instructional purposes,” the report notes, adding that “most state tests are administered in the spring and results come back to the districts after the conclusion of the school year.”

The report was designed to provide objective evidence to the on-going debate about standardized testing in public schools. As the introduction to the report points out, the controversies arising from this public disagreement on testing have “stoked the testing ‘opt-out’ movement, fueled divisions among public educators and others, undermined the new state standards, and created substantial backlash over the use of assessments.” A characteristic of the heated debate has been to put the blame on various entities, especially the local school systems, but the report shows evidence to the contrary.

“Everyone has some culpability in how much testing there is and how redundant and uncoordinated it is—Congress, the U.S. Department of Education, states, local school systems, and even individual schools and teachers,” said **Michael Casserly, the Council’s executive director**, in a [press release announcing the findings](#). “Everyone must play a role in improving this situation.”

U.S. Department of Education Issues “Testing Action Plan”

On the same day the report was published, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) released a [Testing Action Plan](#) to outline its role in improving the testing landscape. The plan offers a set of principles and steps for fewer and smarter assessments to ensure that assessments are worth taking, of high quality, and time-limited, among other measures.

“In too many schools, there is unnecessary testing and not enough clarity of purpose applied to the task of assessing students, consuming too much instructional time and creating undue stress for educators and students,” the plan reads. “The Administration bears some of the responsibility for this, and we are committed to being part of the solution.”

This plan is an attempt to correct this testing imbalance while protecting the role of good assessment in guiding progress for students and evaluating schools and educators.

“Done well and thoughtfully, assessments are tools for learning and promoting equity,” the narrative reads. “They provide necessary information for educators, families, the public, and students themselves to measure progress and improve outcomes for all learners. Done poorly, in excess, or without clear purpose, they take valuable time away from teaching and learning, draining creative approaches from our classrooms.”

The administration plans to provide (1) financial support to help states develop better and less burdensome assessments; (2) expertise for those states and districts that are trying to reduce testing time; (3) flexibility from federal mandates; and (4) a reduction in use of student test scores for evaluating educators and teacher preparation programs.

One item that received a great deal of attention was the plan’s recommendation that states cap the percentage of instructional time students spend taking required statewide standardized assessments at 2 percent.

“What happens if somebody puts a cap on testing, and to meet the cap ends up eliminating tests that could actually be helpful, or leaves the redundancy in the test and gets rid of a test that teachers can use to inform their instruction?,” Casserly said in the [New York Times](#).

The 2 percent cap was one of several recommendations targeted at Congress as it works to rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as NCLB. ED also urged Congress to ensure a new ESEA focuses on the most vulnerable students by requiring that states and districts take action in schools where subgroups of students are continually falling behind, including the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools, and high schools with low graduation rates.

Student Testing in America’s Great City Schools is available at <http://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/87/Testing%20Report.pdf>.

ED’s Testing Action Plan is available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/fact-sheet-testing-action-plan>.

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. Follow the Alliance on Twitter ([www.twitter.com/all4ed](https://twitter.com/all4ed)), Facebook (www.facebook.com/all4ed), and the Alliance’s “High School Soup” blog (www.all4ed.org/blog).