

**Bob Wise**  
**Governor of West Virginia, 2001–2005**  
**Member of U.S. House of Representatives, 1983–2001**



***Prepared Testimony of Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia***

Public Hearing: Implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act  
U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue SW., Barnard Auditorium  
Washington, DC. 20202

January 11, 2016

My name is Bob Wise and I am president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, a national policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those who are traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, a career, and citizenship. Prior to joining the Alliance, I served in the House of Representatives for eighteen years and as governor of West Virginia.

I am honored to speak to you today regarding regulations for the bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), legislation that was possible only due to a level of bipartisanship that, in recent years, has become all too rare.

ESSA keeps the nation's foot on the high school graduation rate gas pedal by maintaining federal policy from both the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations that, along with hard-working educators, parents, and students, have led to the nation's highest graduation rate on record at 82.3 percent for the 2013–14 school year. This means a reduction in the number of high school dropouts from 1 million in 2008 to approximately 750,000 in 2012.

Where federal graduation rate regulations have clearly assisted major education gains, those regulations need to be renewed. ESSA includes an important requirement to support and improve high schools where one-third or more of students do not graduate. It is critical for ESSA regulations to require the use of the uniform Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate to identify these schools.

Even with those gains, one in five students still drops out every year—that is more than 4,000 students every school day. Additionally, there remain 1,235 high schools nationwide that fail to graduate one-third or more of their students. These schools disproportionately enroll students of color and students from low-income families. Graduation rate gaps also remain prevalent. In fact, over the past four years, the gap in high school graduation rates between Latino and white students grew in nine states. The gap between African American and white students grew in ten states.

The two areas of rising rates getting major attention are the Federal Reserve and the high school graduation rates. For the short term impact on the nation's economy, the Federal Reserve's raising of interest rates has generated a lot of attention, but over the long term, rising graduation rates are much more important for the nation's economy.

According to research released by the Alliance for Excellent Education in December, increasing the national high school graduation rate to 90 percent would likely create 65,150 new jobs and boost gross domestic product by \$11.5 billion annually. And that is for just one class of dropouts.

Ensuring that more students graduate from high school is an important first step, but simply earning a diploma is no longer enough in today's society. Every student needs additional training or education after high school to compete for a good-paying job; therefore, a high school diploma must be the jumping-off point rather than the end point.

ESSA provides states, districts, and schools with the flexibility they need to innovate and implement evidenced-based school improvement efforts to continue progress on the national graduation rate and ensure that all students graduate with deeper learning outcomes, including critical thinking, collaboration, and other skills they need to succeed in today's economy.

This flexibility must be balanced, however, with an unwavering commitment to equity; while the nation has made remarkable progress, major challenges in educational opportunity and quality persist.

As the U.S. Department of Education (ED) works to issue regulations for ESSA, the Alliance encourages it to clarify five very important issues. Specifically, ESSA regulations must do the following:

- 1) Use the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate to implement ESSA's requirement to identify and support high schools where one-third or more of students do not graduate.
- 2) Do not allow state accountability systems to mask the graduation rates and achievement of traditionally underserved students, such as students of color, and students from low-income communities.
- 3) Require that graduation rates carry sufficient weight within state accountability systems in order to trigger interventions in high schools that have low-graduation rates.
- 4) Use funding targeted for school improvement purposes for high quality interventions in schools that have the lowest-performing students and the most promising approaches for school improvement.
- 5) Clarify that states have the flexibility to utilize accountability dashboards, not just indexes. Just as a car's dashboard provides information on a variety of parts such as the engine, tire pressure, or gas levels, an accountability dashboard will provide an array of information about school performance and practices rather than a single index score. Dashboards promote transparency, support continuous improvement of all schools, and allow states to more effectively measure the deeper learning skills and competencies students need to be successful in the modern world.

The Alliance will submit additional details on these and other recommendations in response to ED's Request for Information.

The nation has made tremendous progress in increasing the high school graduation rate, but more work is necessary to preserve the gains already made. Graduation rate gaps between different groups of students need to be addressed, and high schools that fail to graduate one-third or more of their students need to be targeted to ensure that *all* students—regardless of their background or zip code—have access to a high-quality education that will secure their individual futures, as well as that of the nation.