



# Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **DIGITAL LEARNING DAY: Alliance for Excellent Education to Host Live Video Discussions on the State of Digital Equity in Schools and Communities**

On Wednesday, February 17, thousands of teachers and millions of students will celebrate the fifth annual Digital Learning Day (DLDay). Created by the Alliance for Excellent Education in 2012, DLDay is a nationwide celebration that highlights great teaching and demonstrates how technology can improve student outcomes.



Through live digital events throughout DLDay, the Alliance will explore the state of digital equity in schools and communities across America. These short, live video sessions will be streamed over the internet and hosted by emcee **Rafranz Davis**, executive director of professional and digital learning for Lufkin Independent School District (TX). From small, rural towns to large, urban cities, local leaders, educators, and policymakers will examine how the digital divide affects their communities and what they are doing to solve it. A complete schedule is below. Click on a session to access additional details.

### **February 17, 2016: Digital Learning Day Schedule (All Times Eastern)**

10:00 – 10:30 a.m.	<a href="#">Digital Equity and Access: Connecting Students Beyond School</a>
11:00 – 11:20 a.m.	<a href="#">Digital Equity and Leadership: Creating a Culture of Equity and Innovation</a>
12:00 – 12:20 p.m.	<a href="#">Digital Equity and Teacher Preparation: Improving the K–12 Teaching Pipeline</a>
2:00 – 2:20 p.m.	<a href="#">Digital Equity and College/Career Readiness: Diversifying Students in STEM</a>
3:00 – 3:20 p.m.	<a href="#">Digital Equity and Instructional Quality: Transforming Teaching Through Technology</a>
4:00 – 4:20 p.m.	<a href="#">Digital Equity: The Road Ahead</a>

Featured speakers during the day will include **Federal Communications Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel**; **Coachella Valley Unified School District (CA) Superintendent Darryl Adams**; **Jennings School District (MO) Superintendent Tiffany Anderson**; **Christina O'Connor**, project director of Transforming Teaching through Technology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro; **Kimberly Marion**, program manager of magnet schools and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) programs at Winston Salem/Forsyth County Schools (NC); **Feowyn Mackinnon**, head of school at MC2 STEM High School (OH); **Mary Lubeskie**, district technology coordinator at Manheim Central School District (PA), and **Zac Chase**, a ConnectED fellow in the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology.

See the complete list of speakers, panel descriptions, and register to participate at [www.DigitalLearningDay.org/equity](http://www.DigitalLearningDay.org/equity).



## **STRONGER TOGETHER: President Obama’s Final Budget Proposes New \$120 Million Program to Better Integrate Schools by Income, \$80 Million for High School Redesign**

Released on February 9, President Obama’s Fiscal Year 2017 budget proposal—his last as president—carves out funding to turn around low-performing schools, includes \$80 million for a competitive grant program to redesign America’s high schools, and requests \$120 million for a new program to promote greater socioeconomic integration within schools.

“The president’s budget reflects the administration’s broader efforts to expand opportunity and ensure every child can achieve his or her full potential,” said **Acting Education Secretary John B. King Jr.** “We have made tremendous progress with record high school graduation rates and more students of color going to college, but we have further to go to ensure that educational excellence is a reality for all students. This budget builds on the administration’s continued efforts to invest in education, from high-quality early learning through college.”

Overall, the president’s budget would increase discretionary funding (excluding Pell grants) for the U.S. Department of Education by \$1.1 billion. Special education state grants would receive \$11.9 billion, the same amount as the previous year. Title I would receive approximately \$16 billion, which is an increase of \$450 million over the previous year. Of the \$450 million increase, Obama would target \$174 million for turning around low-performing schools. (Some are questioning whether the \$450 million is a true increase due to requirements within the Every Student Succeeds Act and the elimination of the School Improvement Grants program. For more on the subject, read the [budget analysis from \*Education Week’s Politics K–12\* blog](#)).

The president’s new \$120 million “Stronger Together” competitive grant program would support “voluntary, community-supported efforts to develop and implement strategies to address the effects of concentrated poverty by increasing socioeconomic diversity in pre-K–12 schools.” In a [February 9 blog post for Medium](#), King writes that such an approach has helped students from low-income families perform better academically. “In Montgomery County, Maryland, children in public housing who attended the district’s most advantaged elementary schools performed better over time than those attending higher-poverty schools, despite additional per-student funding provided at higher-poverty schools,” King writes.

The president is requesting \$80 million for a new “Next Generation High Schools” program that would “support innovative models that personalize teaching and promote active learning for students, and that enable secondary schools to adopt new approaches for engaging, preparing, and inspiring college- and career-ready students.” It would focus on school models that engage and expand opportunities for girls and other groups underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. President Obama proposed \$125 million for Next Generation High Schools in the previous year, but the program was not funded by Congress.

In a [statement](#), **Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise** praised the focus on educational opportunity and equity within the president’s budget proposal. “The national high school graduation rate is at an all-time high, but more than 4,000 students still drop out every school day. Additionally, students of color and students from low-income families continue to

graduate from high school at rates much lower than white students,” Wise said. “Ensuring that more African American, Latino, and other students of color, as well as students from low-income families, earn their high school diploma is a critical first step to putting those individuals on a path to success. And because students of color and students from low-income families now represent the majority of the nation’s students, it is also a critical element of a growing national economy.”

Proposed funding levels for additional programs under the U.S. Department of Education’s jurisdiction are available at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget17/17pbapt.pdf>.



### **OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL?: Many Low-Income Families With Children Lack Consistent Internet Connections**

Although 94 percent of low- and moderate-income families have some form of internet connection, many are “under-connected,” meaning that their connectivity is inconsistent or only available through a mobile device,<sup>1</sup> according to a new report from Rutgers University and the Joan Ganz Cooney Center.

“It’s no longer a simple question of whether or not families are connected to the internet,” said study coauthor **Vikki S. Katz, associate professor of communication at Rutgers University**, “but rather how they are connected, and the implications of being under-connected for children’s access to educational opportunities and parents’ ability to apply for jobs or resources.”

According to the report, *Opportunity for All? Technology and Learning in Low-Income Families*, 23 percent of families below the median income level and 33 percent of those below the poverty level exclusively rely on a mobile device for internet access. Of those families with mobile-only access, 29 percent say they have hit data limits on their plan in the past year while 24 percent say their phone service has been turned off within the last year due to lack of payment.

Among low- and moderate-income families with home internet access, 52 percent say their connection is too slow, 26 percent say too many people share the same computer, and 20 percent say their internet has been cut off in the last year due to lack of payment.

The report notes that the lack of a consistent connection to the internet has far-reaching—and long-term—consequences for children and adults alike.

“Among youth, being under-connected means that critical opportunities to develop creative projects, take advantage of educational media, explore extracurricular programs, and complete homework, are limited,” the report notes. “These limitations can compound over a child’s school years. Educational pathways become restricted, and with them, career opportunities as well. Parents are less able to find or deploy resources to aid the whole family. Today, those most in need of finding services, obtaining jobs, and increasing educational opportunities are the least likely to have full access to the digital technologies that can help provide a level playing field. In

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<sup>1</sup> The report defines “mobile-only access” as being able to connect to the internet through a smart device such as a tablet or smartphone, without having a computer at home.

sum, digital inequality can contribute to educational inequality, which in turn perpetuates economic inequality.”

In an effort to provide greater internet connectivity among low-income households, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has proposed modernizing the Lifeline program. The program, which served more than 12 million households last year, provides monthly telephone service discounts for low-income families to assist them in finding jobs, accessing health care services, and supporting their families. The FCC is currently examining how to modernize the program by better supporting twenty-first-century communications such as discounted broadband service for eligible families.

As part of Digital Learning Day on February 17, the Alliance for Excellent Education will host “[Digital Equity and Access: Connecting Students Beyond School](#),” a live video discussion with **FCC Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel** and **Coachella Valley Unified School District (CA) Superintendent Darryl Adams** to examine the federal role in supporting digital equity, as well as how Coachella Valley Unified is tackling connectivity gaps in rural California. Learn more at [www.DigitalLearningDay.org/Equity](http://www.DigitalLearningDay.org/Equity).

*Opportunity for All? Technology and Learning in Low-Income Families* is available at <http://bit.ly/1Wblsxe>.



### **REVISITING PROFICIENT VS. PREPARED: States Make Progress in Closing “Honesty Gaps” in Student Proficiency Ratings**

Last May, [Achieve released \*Proficient Vs. Prepared\*](#), a report finding that more than half of states report proficiency rates in math and reading that were at least 30 percentage points higher than those reported by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is also known as the Nation’s Report Card and is considered by many to be the “gold standard” in measuring student achievement. Since last year, sixteen states have eliminated or nearly eliminated<sup>2</sup> these “honesty gaps” while nine more have made significant progress toward closing the gaps,<sup>3</sup> according to an updated version of the report that Achieve released on January 28.

“We’re pleased to see so many states being transparent about student performance,” said **Sandy Boyd, chief operating officer at Achieve**, an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit education reform organization. “Parents and educators deserve accurate information about how well students are performing. The transition to college- and career-ready assessments in many states is an important step and while tests are not the only indicator of readiness, they are an important one. If we want to move the needle on student outcomes, we need to be clear about student performance; only then can we help students improve.”

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<sup>2</sup> Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and West Virginia have either eliminated or reduced the gap to where proficiency rates on state tests are within 5 percentage points of those reported by NAEP.

<sup>3</sup> Alaska, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Oregon, and Washington have closed their gaps by 10 percentage points or more in either fourth-grade reading or eighth-grade math, but they still have gaps of more than 5 percentage points.

Alabama, Kentucky, and Minnesota continue to have “moderate” gaps between 5 and 20 percentage points, the report notes, while gaps in North Carolina and Tennessee remained roughly the same, with at least one gap larger than 20 percentage points. Meanwhile, the report cites Iowa, Oklahoma, Texas, and Virginia for “[continuing] to insist that far more students are proficient than their NAEP scores indicate,” as shown in the table below.

**Percentage-Point Gaps in Proficiency Rates on NAEP vs. State Tests**

State	2013–14 Fourth-Grade Reading Gap	2014–15 Fourth-Grade Reading Gap		2013–14 Eighth-Grade Math Gap	2014–15 Eighth-Grade Math Gap
Iowa	-37	-39		-39	-40
Oklahoma	-35	-37		-29	-30
Texas	-46	-43		-48	43
Virginia	-27	-34		-29	-36

The report focuses on fourth-grade reading scores because “learning to read by this grade sets the foundation for reading to learn throughout the rest of a student’s academic career” while eighth-grade math was chosen because students “need this foundation to be able to continue on through higher level math in high school,” according to Achieve’s [press release announcing the findings from the report](#).

The report notes that it “does not compare the content of the tests, but only of the percentage of students deemed proficient on each.” As defined by NAEP, proficiency equates to “solid academic performance” in the grade level assessed. “Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills approximate to the subject matter,” the report says.

The full report, which includes data for every state and the District of Columbia, is available at <http://www.achieve.org/files/ProficiencyvsPrepared2.pdf>.



**STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESSES: Governors Share Plans to Prepare More Students for College, Career, and Life**

As annual state of the state addresses are delivered, governors continue to highlight key education issues, including increasing graduation rates, college and career readiness, and workforce training. This series of addresses also focused on improving education for students from low-income families, access to high-quality education programs, and the necessity of a better educated population to fuel economic growth and prosperity.

**Delaware: Gov. Jack Markell Forms Student Pathways for College, Career, and Life**

In his [January 21 state of the state address](#), Delaware Gov. Jack Markell (D) emphasized the connection between economy and education, noting that improving access to better education and training boosts the local economy. Despite employment in Delaware reaching historic highs, Markell explained, employers are struggling to find qualified workers. Markell highlighted

efforts underway to match training with available jobs. Since 65 percent of jobs require a postsecondary degree or professional certificate, Markell shared his goal that by 2025, 65 percent of Delawareans will have the required degree for these positions.

Markell acknowledged several programs that are creating pathways to better prepare students for the workforce, allowing students to work directly with employers to gain the necessary skills to succeed. The Pathways to Prosperity initiative, for example, has grown to include more than 5,000 students in twenty-nine high schools, and has pathways in ten areas, including manufacturing and computer networking. Markell also discussed a focus on computer science pathways to expose more students to computer programming.

“It is our responsibility to provide Delawareans with the bridge to the life they want—workforce training for people who want to upgrade their skills; education that aligns with the knowledge they need in the new economy,” Markell said.

Markell applauded Delaware’s record high high school graduation rate and the success of the state’s college-ready students, sharing that in the last two years, all of these college-ready students have been accepted to college and nearly all have enrolled. In the past, as many as one in five had not, Markell said.

Markell addressed the need to increase access to high-quality programs and well-educated teachers for students from low-income families. “We all know that education is the great equalizer—providing the ladder from poverty to opportunity, separating the citizen from the inmate, distinguishing the vibrant thriving communities from those that seem to be forever in decline,” he said.

### **Illinois: Gov. Bruce Rauner Lays Out Specific Goals to Improve Illinois Education System**

During his [January 27 state of the state address](#), **Illinois Gov. Bruce Rauner (R)** deemed education as the solution to better life in Illinois, saying, “The key to rising family incomes, more high-paying jobs, and a better life for everyone in Illinois, is to have a high-quality, fully-integrated education system from cradle to career, from early education, to K–12 public schools, to outstanding community colleges and universities, all the way to coordinated job training and technical training later in life.”

Rauner outlined specific goals in his address to work toward an improved education system in the state. He called for an increase in support for low-income and rural school districts to provide high-quality classrooms in communities across the state. Rauner emphasized the importance of partnerships between high schools, community colleges, and local businesses to develop training opportunities to prepare students who will not seek a postsecondary degree for a well-paying career. He discussed the development of a student growth measure to determine progress toward college and career readiness, and as an accountability system for schools. Rauner also wants more programs supporting school choice options for students from low-income families who are trapped in failing schools.

## Utah: Gov. Gary Herbert Challenges Utah to Reach 90 Percent High School Graduation Rate

In his [January 27 state of the state address](#), **Utah Gov. Gary Herbert (R)** acknowledged the growth in the state’s high school graduation rate during his tenure, increasing nearly 10 percentage points to an 84 percent graduation rate. This translates to more than 3,400 additional students graduating each year. Despite the improvements, Herbert said, “I know that we can and that we must, in fact, do better.”

“I am challenging teachers, parents, principals, school board members, and most importantly, our students to raise our graduation rate in this state to 90 percent in the next four years,” Hebert said. “I pledge to you tonight that we will bring to bear the necessary resources, determination, and innovation to achieve this goal.”

## Alabama: Gov. Robert Bentley Shares Plan to Help More Students from Low-Income Families Get to College

During his [February 2 state of the state address](#), **Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley (R)** shared his goal of getting more students from low-income families to college. Bentley discussed Alabama’s FUTURE Scholarship Plan, which begins with seventh-grade students in the state’s poorest counties, and provides tutoring, summer-help programs, college visits, and financial planning to form a clear pathway for these students to postsecondary institutions. The program may also pay for students’ two-year college tuition. “The FUTURE Scholarship Plan will not only educate and train our students, it will produce a pipeline of well-trained, well-educated talent for industries so those businesses can expand and grow,” said Bentley.

Bentley also addressed workforce training systems, which are driven by business and industry demand based on skills needed. He also noted that Alabama’s K–12 education system, postsecondary institutions, and companies will work together to “educate, and train but to also create a talent-supply chain of hardworking Alabamians to business and industries.”

In his address, Bentley discussed connectivity, noting that more than 1 million Alabamians do not have access to high-speed wireless technology. His plan would provide broadband access in rural and underserved communities, including providing infrastructure and enabling providers to deliver affordable services, stating that “promoting a robust broadband network will lead to a stronger education system.”

***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://www.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)).