Equity-Focused Systems of High School Improvement

The national high school graduation rate is at an all-time high. But lost among press releases and news articles celebrating that progress is the fact that large segments of the student population have high school graduation rates that trail those of their white peers by 10 percentage points or more. Worse, approximately 2,000 high schools nationwide graduate fewer than 67 percent of their students. These schools disproportionately enroll students from low-income families, African American and Latino students, students with disabilities, and English language learners. Additionally, many low-performing students attend high schools not considered low-performing overall.

The Alliance for Excellent Education (All4Ed) believes the most successful path to ensuring positive educational outcomes for all students is a comprehensive, multifaceted, and systemic approach to school improvement that appropriately identifies low-performing schools and students for the support and resources necessary to succeed. Just as schools must hold all students to the same high academic standards, districts and states must hold schools accountable for the academic performance and achievement of their students, particularly those historically underserved and those underperforming. This requires an integrated system of federal, state, and district policies and practices that prioritize these students and their needs.

Federal Advocacy

All4Ed has a history of advocating at the *federal* level for policy changes designed to identify and prioritize support for low-performing high schools and continues to advocate for such policies. All4Ed worked with President George W. Bush's administration to establish a common high school graduation rate that brought reliability to publicly reported graduation rates and eliminated calculations that hid students who dropped out of high school.

During development of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, All4Ed collaborated with members of the U.S. Congress to ensure the final law included measures to safeguard the interests and needs of historically underserved students and those who are underperforming. Through its advocacy efforts, All4Ed secured key provisions in ESSA requiring (1) states to identify and support high schools with a graduation rate at or below 67 percent and (2) districts and schools to identify and support low-performing groups of students. Additionally, All4Ed successfully advocated for measures that allow districts to prioritize high-poverty high schools for federal funding through Title I and states to assess students through high-quality projects, portfolios, and other performance tasks that foster critical thinking.

Today, All4Ed continues to assist federal policymakers in overseeing ESSA's implementation, including advising congressional committees, advocating for adequate federal funding, and urging President Donald Trump's administration to ensure that states comply with the letter and spirit of the law as it relates to low-performing student groups.

State Policy Guidance

In addition to its federal advocacy, All4Ed assists *states* with developing and implementing policies designed to close academic achievement gaps and improve low-performing high schools.

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Specifically, All4Ed advises states on development and implementation of their ESSA plans, prioritizing the following components:

- School rating systems that reflect the performance of historically underserved students rather than hiding them within an overall average

- Accountability systems that measure and reward college and career readiness

- Policies for identifying and supporting schools with low-performing subgroups of students

- A lower "n-size," which is the minimum number of students required for monitoring and reporting academic performance and achievement of student groups

- Appropriate calculation and inclusion of graduation rates in measuring high school academic performance and identifying for support high schools with a graduation rate at or below 67 percent

As states implement their ESSA plans, All4Ed will monitor whether these new state policies identify low-performing schools and student groups for support and lead to appropriate interventions designed to improve student academic performance and achievement. All4Ed also will track whether states are overlooking significant numbers of underperforming students in identifying and improving low-performing schools.

District-Level Assistance

By leveraging its Future Ready Schools® network of more than 3,200 school districts, representing more than 19 million students, All4Ed supports *districts* by broadly disseminating information and resources about evidence-based strategies and best practices for school improvement, including efforts to deepen students' learning and align education policies and practices with scientific research on adolescent learning and development.

All4Ed's Science of Adolescent Learning (SAL) initiative focuses on translating and communicating adolescent learning and development research and applying it to school improvement policy and practice, especially for secondary schools serving students who are underperforming and/or historically underserved. Research shows that adolescence is a time of great opportunity and risk. Consequently, this unique stage of human development, along with specific challenges faced by secondary schools, calls for direct attention and support to ensure that educators implement SAL-informed strategies. By aligning policy and practice with this scientific research, educators can create learning environments that capitalize on the unique opportunities that adolescence offers.

Additionally, a select number of district and school education leaders will receive support from All4Ed to improve learning outcomes in high schools with large populations of historically underserved and/or underperforming students.

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