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Public Education Policy And Progress



CITIES IN CRISIS: New Report and National Campaign Focus on the High School Dropout Crisis in the United States

Only about half of all students from the nation's fifty largest cities graduate from high school, according to a new report released by the America's Promise Alliance (APA) and prepared by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center.

The report, *Cities in Crisis: A Special Analytic Report on High School Graduation*, was released at an April 1 event that also kicked off APA's national campaign to reduce high school dropout rates and prepare children for college, work, and life. The campaign will conduct a series of dropout prevention summits in every state and in fifty communities over the next two years. These summits are designed to increase awareness about the dropout crisis and to develop specific plans to help local high schools raise graduation rates.

"When more than one million students a year drop out of high school, it's more than a problem, it's a catastrophe," said **General Colin Powell, founding chair of APA**. "Our economic and national security are at risk when we fail to educate the leaders and the workforce of the future. It's time for a national 'call to arms,' because we cannot afford to let nearly one third of our kids fail."

According to *Cities in Crisis*, written by **Christopher B. Swanson, director of the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center**, graduating from high school in America's largest cities amounts to a "coin toss." It finds that only 52 percent of students in the principal school systems of the fifty largest cities complete high school with a diploma—a rate well below the national graduation rate of 70 percent, and below the 60.4 percent graduation rate for the average urban locale. And while only six of the fifty cities examined reach or exceed the national average, seventeen of the nation's fifty largest cities have graduation rates lower than 50 percent.

Highest and Lowest Graduation Rates Among the Nation's Fifty Largest Cities

Top Five		Bottom Five	
City	Graduation Rate	City	Graduation Rate
Mesa, AZ	77.1 %	Detroit, MI	24.9 %
San Jose, CA	77.0 %	Indianapolis, IN	30.5 %
Nashville-Davidson Co., TN	77.0 %	Cleveland, OH	34.1 %
Colorado Springs, CO	76.0 %	Baltimore, MD	34.6 %
San Francisco, CA	73.1 %	Columbus, OH	40.9 %

Cities in Crisis (Continued from p. 1)

Examining the differences in graduation rates between the urban and suburban segments of the same metropolitan areas, Swanson finds a seventeen-point “graduation gap” for fifty largest cities, similar to the fifteen-point gap between suburban and urban areas found for the nation as a whole.¹

However, thirteen of the metropolitan areas studied had urban-suburban graduation gaps of 25 percentage points or more. In Baltimore and Columbus, students served by suburban systems were twice as likely as their urban peers to graduate from high school, as shown below.

City	Graduation Rate in Urban Districts	Graduation Rate in Suburban Districts	Urban-Suburban Gap
Baltimore, MD	34.6%	81.5%	47.0%
Columbus, OH	40.9%	82.9%	42.0%

“If three out of every 10 students in the nation failing to graduate is reason for concern, then the fact that just half of those educated in America’s largest cities are finishing high school truly raises cause for alarm,” the report concludes. “And the much higher rates of high school completion among their suburban counterparts—who may literally live and attend school right around the corner—place in a particularly harsh and unflattering light the deep undercurrents of inequity that plague American public education.”

More information on the report and the campaign is available at <http://www.americaspromise.org/APAPage.aspx?id=10354>.

Spellings Announces Plan for a Uniform High School Graduation Rate

At the America’s Promise Alliance April 1 event, **U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings** announced plans for administrative action to ensure that all states use the same formula to calculate high school graduation rates. Spellings said that action would be taken in the “coming weeks” and that the graduation rate data would be publicly available so that people can compare how students of every race, background, and income level are performing.

“One reason that the high school dropout crisis is known as the ‘silent epidemic’ is that the problem is frequently masked or minimized by inconsistent and opaque data reporting systems,” Spellings said. “For example, in some districts, a student who leaves school is counted as a dropout only if he or she registers as one. In others, a dropout’s promise to get a G.E.D. at an unspecified future date is good enough to merit ‘graduate’ status. With such loose definitions of what it means to graduate, it’s no wonder this epidemic has been so silent!”

Spellings also said the need for more accurate graduation rates and greater accountability is an issue of “strong consensus” and said that it unites everyone from business to government to the nonprofit sector.

Her entire speech is available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2008/04/04012008.html>.

¹ Nationwide, the report finds that students in suburban (74.9 percent) and rural (73.2 percent) public high schools are more likely to graduate than students in the country’s urban public high schools (60.4 percent).



“MEASURING AND IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS”: New Alliance Brief Says It Will Take More than Merit Pay to Raise Teacher Performance

Most education reformers agree that effective teaching is defined by improving student learning, but they disagree on how to measure teacher effectiveness and how to use those measurements to improve teaching. Thus far, most of the policy debate on teacher effectiveness has focused on using test scores to implement merit pay or to fire teachers, but those strategies alone will not lift teacher performance on a large scale. So says “Measuring and Improving the Effectiveness of High School Teachers,” a new issue brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education.

Instead, the brief argues that effectiveness measures could be better used to enhance professional development and teacher education, strengthen evaluations and career development, and revamp accountability policies to reward and encourage student learning. Only then can staffing, pay, or any other high school reform effort advance the primary goal of improving student performance.

“Student outcomes, as much as teacher qualifications, should be the measurement of success,” says **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Using effectiveness as a way for teachers to build on their strengths and improve any weaknesses can only result in a more effective teaching force and, in turn, higher student achievement.”

But before effectiveness measures can be used to improve teaching, the brief argues, educators and policymakers must invest in solid, objective ways to measure a teacher’s effectiveness. It notes that many experts currently believe that the best method is a “value-added” analysis, a statistical method that compares a student’s performance on a standardized assessment to an estimate of how much academic growth a student is expected to make for the year.²

Determining added value for high school teachers, however, is more difficult than for teachers in the lower grades. The brief says that a high school student’s achievement, especially in the humanities, is influenced by multiple teachers. In addition, most high schools do not have standardized end-of-course exams, nor do they administer standardized tests every year; thus, a value-added analysis will mostly capture the impact of teachers in core academic subjects, such as English, math, science, and social studies, for which standardized assessments are available.

The brief also notes, however, that when value-added analysis is done carefully and supplemented with other measures of student learning, the method can generate reliable data that can be used to help teachers improve. In fact, over the past decade, high schools in Tennessee, Ohio, North Carolina, Texas, and Colorado have generated high school value-added data to improve teaching.

² The brief acknowledges that standardized assessments are not perfect measures, but that they are better than the haphazard and irregular evaluations and qualifications—which it says are only proxies for effectiveness—that are currently used to evaluate teachers. It adds that judging teachers by the performance of students on a single test is not an accurate measure of what teachers contribute to student learning. Instead, it says that teacher effectiveness should be measured by the amount of growth a student makes over time, demonstrated on several assessments.

“Measuring and Improving the Effectiveness of High School Teachers” (Continued from p. 3)

The brief also considers how effectiveness measures can be used to improve the knowledge and skills of teachers so that they improve student achievement. One way is to evaluate which professional development programs are the most productive in enhancing teacher effectiveness and to identify the top-performing teachers and leverage their expertise to help improve low-performing teachers. By using the strengths of effective teachers to improve the practice of other teachers, professional development fosters collaboration and builds capacity within a school. In addition, effectiveness measures can enhance teacher education programs by using value-added data to determine the effectiveness of candidates graduating from a specific teacher preparation program, a practice that is currently underway in Louisiana, Ohio, and Virginia.

The brief adds that effectiveness measures can also be used to strengthen teacher evaluations, which are often poorly constructed and administered randomly, and aid in career development. They can also work to revamp accountability policies if responsibility for student growth primarily rests on the shoulders of schools as a whole, since multiple teachers contribute to student learning, particularly at the high school level. At the same time, the brief finds that individual incentives such as extra pay, when combined with professional support, are crucial factors in increasing teacher effectiveness.

Admitting that effectiveness measures are “far from perfect,” the brief maintains that they “hold great promise ... for improving student outcomes.” However, calling for improved measures of student learning, it adds that policymakers and educators must take steps to ensure that effectiveness measures are accurate and actionable and notes that “States and districts must enhance their data systems so that yearly student data is accessible and so that student data can be tied to teacher data in ways that produce effectiveness measures on a large scale.” Currently, only fifteen states can link student data to teachers in order to perform value-added analysis.

Because few valid and reliable measures of teacher knowledge and skills exist and most teacher evaluation tools are inadequate, policymakers and educators must develop and strengthen teacher effectiveness measures that assess knowledge, skill, and classroom practice. The brief adds that the execution and culture of professional development must markedly change, evaluations and career ladders must be enhanced, and accountability systems must have the right mix of incentives and consequences that fosters better teaching and raises student achievement.

The complete brief is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/TeacherEffectiveness.pdf>.



“EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC GROWTH”: Economists Find that Students’ Performance in Math and Science Can Impact Economic Growth

An article in the Spring 2008 issue of *Education Next* prepared by a group of four economists discusses how human capital accounts for differences in economic growth for fifty countries from 1960 to 2000. The article, titled “Education and Economic Growth,” centers on a study that the economists conducted. They find that higher levels of cognitive skill, defined as “the performance of students on tests in math and science,” play a major role in explaining international differences in economic growth.

In the past, economists have only looked at the effect that “school attainment,” defined as the average number of years that students remain in school, has on a nation’s economic future. But that kind of analysis, they argue, has two major drawbacks: first, a year of schooling in Papua New Guinea does not equal a year of schooling in Japan. Second, these analyses do not account for learning done outside the classroom such as within families or over the Internet.

In this study, the authors—**Eric A. Hanushek, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University; Dean T. Jamison, professor of health economics in the School of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco; Eliot A. Jamison, an investment professional at Babcock and Brown; and Ludger Woessmann, professor of economics at the University of Munich**—focused only on students’ performance in math and science, which they saw as a more direct measure of a country’s human capital. To conduct the analysis, they used Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and other international math and science assessments, dating back to 1964. Then, using the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the United States’ performance on each international test, the economists aggregated all available scores for each country into measures of cognitive skill levels for each country.

The analysis identified top performers (Finland and Japan), average performers (United States and Germany) and low performers (Albania, the Philippines, and South Africa) in math and science. In addition, because they had data from four decades, the authors were able to track an individual country’s performance. Through examining the data, they were able to determine that while students in the United States, Germany, and Hungary have slipped, students in the Netherlands and Finland have improved.

With this new information, the authors compared the economic benefit of higher levels of school attainment with the benefits of higher levels of cognitive skills. They found that each additional year of schooling in a country increased the average forty-year growth rate in gross domestic product (GDP) by 0.37 percentage points. When they performed the analysis again and included the average test-score performance of a country, they found that countries with higher test scores experienced far higher growth rates in GDP.

“If one country’s test-score performance was 0.5 standard deviations higher than another country during the 1960s—a little less than the current difference in the scores between such top-performing countries as Finland and Hong Kong and the United States,” the report reads, “the first country’s growth rate was, on average, one full percentage point higher annually over the following forty-year period than the second country’s growth rate.”

While a 0.37 percentage points increase and 1 full percentage point increase might not sound like much, the authors point out that since World War II, the world economic growth rate has been around 2 to 3 percent of GDP annually. “Lifting it by 0.37 percentage points is a boost to annual growth rates of more than 10 percent of what would otherwise have occurred,” they write.

The article notes that two additional factors affect a country’s economic growth rate: the security of its property rights and its openness to international trade. Once those factors were taken into account, the positive effect of cognitive skills decreases from one full percentage point to 0.63 percentage points, but the impact is still significant.

Education and Economic Growth (Continued from p. 5)

The authors also examine what would happen to GDP in the United States if the nation could boost its performance on the PISA math and science exams by fifty points so that it would rank among the world leaders. Were the United States to close this gap, the study's authors project that the United States GDP would be 4.5 percent greater by 2015.

"That 4.5 percent increment in GDP is equal to the total the U.S. currently spends on K–12 education," the report reads. "In other words, had that money effectively raised cognitive skills by the fifty test points that would have brought the United States close to world leadership, the economic returns to our country would probably have been enough to cover the entire cost of education in 2015 and after."

But if America has traditionally performed so far below its international counterparts, how is it a world leader now? Anticipating this question, the article explains that the United States may be "resting on its historic record as the world's leader in educational attainment," which includes opening secondary schools for all citizens and expanding higher education through land-grant colleges and the G.I. Bill. Additionally, the authors believe that the United States' freer labor and product markets, limited government regulation, and lower levels of government involvement in the operation of the economy tends to "encourage investment, permit the rapid development of new products and activities by firms, and allow U.S. workers to adjust to new opportunities."

However, the article ends with a note of caution. "Although the strengths of the U.S. economy and its higher-education system offer some hope for the future, the situation at the K–12 level should spark concerns about the long-term outlook for the U.S. economy, which could eventually have an impact on the higher-education system as well..." it reads. "Identifying what works and how to implement it on a society-wide scale remains a challenge, not only for the U.S. but also for many nations across the globe. But, if we are to remain economically competitive, we need to solve the puzzle of our schools..."

"Education and Economic Growth" is available at <http://www.hoover.org/publications/ednext/16110377.html>.



NAEP 2007 WRITING SCORES RELEASED: More Students Performing At or Above Basic, Yet Majority Still Below Grade Level

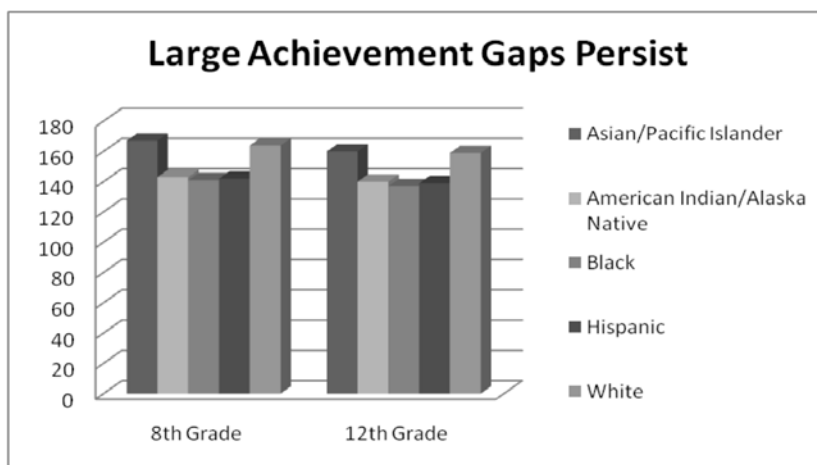
U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings was pleased with the results of the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that were released on April 3, noting that writing scores for eighth- and twelfth-graders are at historic highs. "Just as we have seen with the 2007 reading and math results, student achievement in writing is on the rise," she said. "Colleges and businesses have made clear that stronger writing skills must be taught in our schools, and these scores show the accountability demanded by No Child Left Behind is producing results."

But while average writing scores on the 2007 assessment were higher for both eighth and twelfth graders than they were in 2002 and 1998, the results nevertheless show that America's older students continue to struggle. Only 31 percent of eighth-grade public school students and 24 percent of all twelfth graders scored at or above the proficient level, which many educators and

policymakers equate as being at or above grade level. At the same time, 57 percent of eighth and 58 percent of twelfth graders scored at the basic level, and 13 and 18 percent, respectively, scored at below basic, indicating that they are writing at performance levels considerably below grade level.

The average eighth-grade public school student scored 154 on a three-hundred-point scale, two points higher than in 2002 and six points higher than 1998. Twelfth graders scored an average of 153 points on the same scale—five points higher than in 2002, but only three points higher than in 1998.

While she praised these increases, Spellings did go on to say that she was “not yet satisfied,” and that there is still room for improvement. “Lower and middle performing students improved, and we are seeing continuing closure of racial, ethnic and gender gaps,” she said. “We have more work to do to ensure all groups make gains, but this report assures us that the indicators are moving in the right direction.”



Indeed, the gains posted by minority students were not enough to close large achievement gaps that exist between them and their white and Asian peers, as demonstrated in the graph to the left.

Ten urban districts volunteered to take part in the eighth-grade assessment; four of these had also participated in 2002. Of

the four, Atlanta, Chicago, and Los Angeles performed significantly better than they had five years before. The increase in Houston’s score, however, was not considered significant. Both Atlanta and Los Angeles showed significantly higher gains than did their states—Atlanta gained fifteen points, compared to Georgia’s overall six-point gain; Los Angeles gained nine points at the same time that California made no significant gains.

“We are very encouraged by the writing gains of students in America’s major cities taking the nation’s most challenging test,” said **Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools**. “We’re closer to the national averages in writing than we are in reading or math, although we are steadily closing the gaps in all three subjects.”

The Nation’s Report Card: Writing 2007 can be downloaded at http://nationsreportcard.gov/writing_2007/.

Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events both 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. The Alliance for Excellent Education is a nonprofit organization working to make it possible for America’s six million at-risk middle and high school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.



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