



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



STRENGTHENING TEACHING AND LEARNING: New Hampshire's Shift Away From "Seat Time" Offers Lessons for All States, New Alliance Report Finds

For a century, most students have advanced from grade to grade based on the number of days they spend in class, but New Hampshire schools have moved from “seat time” and toward “competency-based learning,” which advances students when they have mastered course content. *Strengthening High School Teaching and Learning in New Hampshire's Competency-Based System*, a new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education, profiles how two high schools in New Hampshire made this shift and examines the necessary changes at both the school and in state policy. Competency-based advancement is an important part of New Hampshire's strategy for implementing the Common Core State Standards and meeting the state department of education's goal that every student “deserves a course of study that allows him or her to learn in a deep, meaningful, and practical way.”

“When people are buying a new car, they don't ask how long it took to build,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Instead, they ask how well it performs. For too long, the nation's education system has promoted students based on how long they spent sitting in a classroom rather than what they have learned. New Hampshire's experience, although still evolving, holds tremendous promise as an approach for improving student learning outcomes in a system that encourages advancement by demonstrating competency instead of completing seat time.”

Of particular interest in New Hampshire's move to a competency-based system are the changes in teacher and principal roles, as well as instructional practice, that are necessary for successfully implementing this rapidly emerging approach to learning. In both schools featured in the report—Sanborn Regional High School and Spaulding High School—school leaders and teachers are encouraged to become more active designers of their curriculum and of student-centered learning environments. Teachers and principals have the opportunity and time to collaborate with one another and their peers across schools and districts to share ideas and enhance their own professional development.

A move toward competency-based learning has also required the schools to redesign their grading policies and create new course competencies and assessments. Both schools have eliminated the “A–F” and numbered grading system and replaced it with ratings that include “not yet competent” and “insufficient work submitted.” Students deemed not yet competent are offered additional interventions until they reach mastery, including online tools, one-on-one teacher time, and student collaboration. Additionally, both schools have adopted unique and

innovative learning approaches, such as digital learning, that create a more flexible learning schedule that extends beyond the school day.

“As more states and schools look for alternatives to traditional seat-time policies, New Hampshire’s experience provides an excellent opportunity for other states to review effective designs, systems, practices, and policies needed to ensure the capacity of teachers and leaders to implement competency-based learning for all of the nation’s students,” said Wise.

Findings from the brief were highlighted in a January 22 webinar featuring **New Hampshire Department of Education Deputy Commissioner Paul Leather** and two educators from New Hampshire, **Brian Stack, principal of Sanborn Regional High**, and **Erica Stofanak, curriculum, instruction, and assessment coach for the Rochester School District**. Archived video and PowerPoint presentations from the webinar are available at <http://media.all4ed.org/webinar-jan-22-2013>.



Strengthening High School Teaching and learning in New Hampshire’s Competency-Based System is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/StrengtheningHSTeachingLearningNH.pdf>.

GOOD NEWS FOR GRADUATION RATES: Nation’s High School Graduation Rate Highest Since 1974

On January 22, the U.S. Department of Education released new data showing that the nation’s high school graduation rate rose 2.7 percentage points to 78.2 percent, the highest level in more than three decades based on a measurement called Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR). The data is contained in *Public School Graduates and Dropouts from the Common Core of Data: School Year 2009–10*, a new report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

“The new NCES report is good news,” said **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan**. “After three decades of stagnation, the on-time graduation rate for high school students in the 2009–10 school year is the highest it’s been since at least 1974. It’s encouraging that the on-time graduation rate is up substantially from four years earlier. And it’s promising that high school graduation rates are up for all ethnic groups in 2010—especially for Hispanics, whose graduation rate has jumped almost 10 points since 2006.”

According to the report, Asian/Pacific Islanders have the highest AFGR (93.5 percent), followed by white (83.0 percent), Hispanic (71.4 percent), American Indian/Alaska Native (69.1 percent), and black students (66.1 percent).

As shown in the table below, the highest-performing states were Vermont and Wisconsin, which both posted AFGRs over 90 percent. At the other end of the spectrum were Nevada and the District of Columbia, both with AFGRs below 60 percent.

Top Five States		Bottom Five States	
State	AFGR	State	AFGR
Vermont	91.4%	Nevada	57.8%
Wisconsin	91.1%	District of Columbia	59.9%
North Dakota	88.4%	Mississippi	63.8%
Minnesota	88.2%	New Mexico	67.3%
Iowa	87.9%	South Carolina	68.2%

Although high school graduation rates for students of color are on the rise, even some of the highest-performing states had significant graduation rate gaps. In Wisconsin, for example, the AFGR was 95.6 percent for white students, but it was only 66 percent for black students, demonstrating a gap of nearly 30 percentage points. In Minnesota, the AFGR for Hispanic students (66.7 percent) trailed that of white students (92.3 percent) by more than 25 percentage points.

The report identifies some bright spots for students of color. For example, both Iowa (86.3 percent) and New Hampshire (89.9 percent) posted AFGRs over 85 percent for Hispanic students. And in Arizona, the AFGR for black students (81.0 percent) was the highest in the nation.

The report also includes data on high school dropout rates. For the nation, it pegs the overall dropout rate at 3.4 percent for the 2009–10 school year. However, as pointed out in a March 2009 Alliance for Excellent Education report, [*Every Student Counts: The Role of Federal Policy in Improving Graduation Rate Accountability*](#), dropout data is “notoriously unreliable” because it often requires dropouts to report that they are dropping out of school. Additionally, several other factors prevent a student from being counted as a dropout. According to the NCES report, students are not counted as dropouts if they (1) transfer to another public school district, private school, or state- or district-approved education program; (2) are temporary absent due to suspension or school-approved illness; or (3) die.

AFGR vs. ACGR Explained

The graduation rate data in the NCES report is based on the AFGR, which is an estimate of the percentage of high school students who graduate within four years after starting ninth grade. The report notes that while the AFGR is not as accurate as four-year graduation rates that are based on individual student data, such as the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), the AFGR can be computed with currently available data.

Until recently, most states lacked data systems that captured individual public school student-level data over time. For the first time in 2012, however, the U.S. Department of Education has collected a more precise four-year graduation rate across most states called ACGR. Even with the availability of the ACGR, the department will continue to report AFGR because it is possible

to analyze trends going back to at least the 1960s. ACGR, on the other hand, only became available for the graduating class of 2011.

The complete report is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013309.pdf>.



REMEDIAL COURSETAKING: Percentage of First-Year College Students Taking Remedial Courses on the Decline, New NCES Report Finds

From 1999–2000 to 2007–08, the percentage of first-year undergraduate students who reported enrolling in remedial courses dropped from 26 percent to 20 percent, according to a report released this month by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The report, *First-Year Undergraduate Remedial Coursetaking: 1999–2000, 2003–04, 2007–08*, defines remedial course work as “courses for students lacking skills necessary to perform college-level work at the degree of rigor required by the institution.”

As shown in the graphic below, a large percentage of students who attended four-year public institutions reported enrolling in remedial courses in 2007–08 (21 percent) than students attending private institutions (15 percent), the report finds. The same was true for first-year students attending two-year institutions who enrolled in remedial courses (24 percent) compared to those attending four-year institutions (21 percent). Data is also broken down by “selectivity” among four-year institutions, a rating based on whether the institution was open admission, the number of applicants, the number of students admitted, the 25th and 75th percentiles of ACT and/or SAT scores, and whether or not test scores were required.

Institutional control, level, and selectivity	1999–2000	2003–04	2007–08
All institutions	26.3	19.3	20.4
Institutional control and level			
Public institutions			
2-year	30.4	23.4	24.0
4-year	25.0	18.2	21.0
Private institutions			
Not-for-profit 4-year	16.2	13.3	15.1
For-profit less than 2-year	5.1	7.5	5.5
For-profit 2-years or more	16.2	11.4	11.0
Selectivity among 4-year institutions			
Very selective	13.3	11.7	12.8
Moderately selective	22.0	17.0	18.8
Minimally selective	26.7	19.0	20.7
Open admission	37.1	19.2	25.6

When broken down by race/ethnicity, the report finds that remedial course-taking rates declined among students of color between 1999–2000 and 2007–08, but they continue to be higher than those of their white peers. In 2007–08, 30.2 percent of black students and 29.0 percent of Hispanic students reported enrolling in remedial courses, compared to 19.9 percent for white students.

Data in the report comes from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), which, the report notes, has its limitations. For example, the report relies on self-reported data from students rather than transcripts because transcripts generally do not indicate whether a course is remedial. Additionally, previous research finds that not all students who need remediation actually enroll in and complete a remedial course.

“The data and findings presented here should not be construed as describing the entirety of student need, enrollment, or completion of remedial coursework,” the report cautions. “Readers should consider that while the findings presented here are sound given the statistical methods used to produce both the data and the results, they are neither certain nor conclusive.”

The complete report is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013013.pdf>.



STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESSES: Spotlighting Governors’ Speeches in Colorado, Nebraska, Vermont, and Virginia

Colorado: Hickenlooper Champions Equity

Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper (D) expressed pride in the work Colorado has done in improving early childhood education in his [state of the state address on January 10](#). Last year, the state passed the Read Act, an early childhood literacy program that he called “among the most innovative in the country.” The program identifies struggling readers and provides interventions with the goal that all students will be able to read by the end of the third grade.

Among the other gains in education Hickenlooper highlighted is the \$29.9 million the state received in Race to the Top grants to support the gains in early childhood literacy. The money, the governor noted, will serve up to 6,500 new pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students.

When discussing his goals for Colorado’s future, Hickenlooper stressed equity in education. He proposed a new school finance formula that seeks to improve equity in all school districts and opportunities for all students. In that vein, the state will adopt a need-based financial allocation process for higher education this month that will support students with the highest need and incentivize colleges and universities to focus on retention and timely completion.

Nebraska: Heineman Says Education Is the “Great Equalizer”

Nebraska Governor Dave Heineman (R) called education “the great equalizer” and a “top priority” during his [state of the state address on January 15](#).

Heineman praised Nebraska’s P–16 initiative that strengthens academic achievement for all students. Within that, he referenced his 2008 law that provides for statewide assessments in reading, math, and science. He credits legislation, along with a renewed focus and cooperation with the State Board of Education, for gains in student achievement. The most visible of these gains is Nebraska’s high school graduation rate of 86 percent—the fourth best in America, Heineman noted.

The governor's top priority going into 2013 is increasing K–12 education funding. He proposed a \$43 million increase in Fiscal Year 2014, along with a 5-percent increase in special education funding. He also announced a two-year tuition freeze for Nebraska's higher education students, provided his budget is adopted. He has collaborated with presidents within the University of Nebraska system to make this offer. "We are on the right path, and that path starts with quality education," Heineman said.

Vermont: Shumlin Focuses Entire Speech on Education

Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin (D) took a nontraditional approach in his [state of the state address on January 10](#) and focused only on one theme: education. The governor embraced digital learning and emphasized the economic imperative of having a strong education system.

During his speech, Shumlin listed more than a dozen companies in Vermont with job openings but no qualified workers to fill them. "I remain unfailingly optimistic about Vermont's economic future," Shumlin said. "But to ensure our success, we must embrace change in the way we both view and deliver education. The rapid change that is required of us is not optional; it will define our success or deliver our failure."

Shumlin admitted that his state has failed to move enough low-income students beyond high school and that is unacceptable. He quoted research showing that 62 percent of job openings in the next decade will require post-secondary education. Raising the high school graduation rate and college completion rate is high on Shumlin's agenda.

"Technology has dramatically changed the tools available for teaching and learning," Shumlin said. "It has changed the nature of work. The high school degree that brought success and a lifetime job in the old economy ensures a low-wage future in the tech economy. Success in the new economy depends on an educated workforce with skills beyond high school in science, computer technology, engineering, and math."

Shumlin highlighted four areas in which he plans to focus this year. The first is in early childhood education, where he will redirect \$17 million from the state's Earned Income Tax Credit to make high-quality childcare affordable to lower-income people. The second is ensuring that no student is hungry. He proposed that the state cover the gap left by the federal government and provide free lunches to every student who qualifies for reduced-price lunches. His third focus is making sure that education is more accessible and affordable for everyone. This includes promoting dual enrollment, which allows students to take college courses for both high school and college credit, and an early college initiative, which permits students to take college courses while still in high school. Finally, Shumlin would make college more affordable for students. His flagship initiative is the Vermont Strong Scholars program, which, over five years, would pay back the final year of tuition to all students who graduate with a degree in a science, technology, engineering, or math (STEM) field.

Shumlin called for a "Personal Learning Plan" that would follow students from elementary school through their senior year of high school. He said the plans would help guide each student's education and also tie education goals to career opportunities, which would make

school more relevant and increase students' individual options while fostering a connection between school and a career.

Shumlin ended his speech with a strong note of hope and optimism, encouraging state legislators to focus on education this year and ensuring that every student is career ready. "Vermont—and this governor—places the highest priority on education," Shumlin said. "There is no greater responsibility that we have as elected representatives than ensuring that our children have the best education available in the country."

Virginia: McDonnell Links Teacher Pay Raise to New Teacher Evaluation Proposal

Saying that "Better schools mean better jobs and a stronger Virginia," **Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell (R)** used his [January 9 state of the state address](#) to outline a number of education proposals, including the first state-supported pay raise for teachers since 2007. McDonnell would tie the increase in teacher pay to the enactment of what he called the "Educator Fairness Act," a new law that would extend the probationary period for new teachers from three to five years and require a satisfactory rating on a performance evaluation system.

Continuing his focus on teachers, McDonnell asked for funding to support science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) teachers in middle and high school plus a \$15 million program to reward well-performing educators. He also proposed legislation to begin a Teach for America program within the states.

McDonnell proposed a new A–F grading scale for schools and asked that the state place one reading specialist in every school that scores below 75 percent on the third-grade Standard of Learning test. For low-performing schools, McDonnell called for a new statewide school division—the "Opportunity Education Institution"—which would be charged with turning around failing schools. "If a school is consistently failing, the Opportunity Educational Institution will step in to manage it," McDonnell said. "If the school has failed for two years, the Institution can take it over and provide a brand new approach to a broken system."

Noting that Virginia only has four charter schools, McDonnell also called for a new constitutional amendment that would allow the Virginia Board of Education to authorize charter applicants and make it "much easier" for proven charter schools to be established in Virginia.

Speaking to the state's legislators, McDonnell asked them to work with him to "get a few big things done that will create more jobs and more opportunities," adding, "If a young person does not graduate from high school, or does not graduate career or college ready, you have failed, I have failed, and, worse, they have failed."

Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress is a 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; Cyndi Waite; and Kate Bradley.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization that works to improve national and federal policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century. For more information about the Alliance, visit <http://www.all4ed.org>.