



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



ESEA, RIGHT AWAY!: Voters Want Federal Action on High School Reform, According to New National Poll

Improving the quality of public high schools through the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is a voting issue for over eight in ten voters, according to a new bipartisan national poll from the Alliance for Excellent Education. Additionally, over half of voters say that their decision to vote for a current elected official in the 2010 congressional elections will be affected if Congress takes no action to reform the law currently known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

“The Alliance commissioned this bipartisan poll to gain insight into Americans’ views of the public education system,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “The overwhelming takeaway from the poll is that Americans are concerned about the growing problems with the nation’s high schools and they want President Obama and the Congress to act—this year—to improve them.”

According to the poll, voters see a clear connection between the nation’s ability to educate its students and its ability to compete in the global economy, but believe that the nation’s public high schools currently do a poor job of preparing students for success. For example, two thirds of voters believe that a high dropout rate has a significant impact on the nation’s economy (69 percent) and America’s ability to compete in the global economy (65 percent). However, nearly seven in ten voters (69 percent) say that a diploma from America’s public high schools does not prepare graduates to get a good-paying job, while less than half of voters believe that a high school diploma prepares graduates to succeed in college.

“The poor state of the economy has claimed most of the headlines going into the congressional election cycle, but, as our poll shows, voters are keenly aware of how a poor education system hampers the economy’s ability to operate at full capacity,” said Wise.

According to the poll, voters want President Obama, the U.S. Congress, and the nation’s governors to pay more attention to the nation’s public high schools. Nearly half of voters (49 percent) think President Obama is not paying enough attention to public high schools while majorities of voters say that Republicans in Congress (62 percent) and Democrats in Congress (58 percent) are not paying enough attention to the state of public high schools in the United States.

“The belief that the president and the Congress are not paying enough attention to the nation’s public high schools crosses party lines,” said **Democratic pollster Celinda Lake, president of Lake Research Partners**, one of the firms that conducted the poll. “This finding is significant during a time when large segments of the voting public are polarized going into the congressional elections.”

One way the federal government could act to improve high schools is through the reauthorization of ESEA. Overall, more than half (52 percent) of the nation’s voters believe NCLB has done a fair or poor job for public schools in their community. The demand for change to NCLB is much clearer, with over three quarters of voters wanting Congress to change NCLB to improve the quality of public high schools this year. Only 11 percent believe it should stay the way it is now.

“NCLB was groundbreaking when it was signed into law,” said Wise. “But almost ten years later it’s a compact disc in an iPod world—useful but in desperate need of an upgrade. By reauthorizing ESEA, the Congress can address the aspects of NCLB that time, experience, and research have shown need to be significantly improved or updated while doing more to help ensure that every student graduates from high school prepared for college and a career.”

According to the poll, voters overwhelmingly agree, with nearly eight in ten saying it is personally important to them that Congress change ESEA to improve the quality of public high schools and three quarters (74 percent) saying that it is important for Congress to act this year.

“Incumbents and challengers alike have been looking for an issue that speaks to both Republicans and Democrats in the upcoming congressional elections,” said **Republican pollster Christine Matthews, president of Bellwether Research and Consulting**. “This poll finds that solid majorities of Democrats (86 percent), Republicans (70 percent), and Independents (69 percent) say it is personally important to them for Congress to change ESEA to improve public high schools.”

Voters are clear that bipartisanship is important but should not hold up ESEA reauthorization. In fact, two thirds of voters (66 percent) would be more likely to support a candidate who calls for Democrats and Republicans to work together but add that passage of ESEA should not be delayed if both parties cannot reach agreement.

“As congressional incumbents head into the final months of their session as well as heated elections, this poll shows that the public will reward them for action while many will punish them for inaction,” said Wise.

Lake Research Partners and Bellwether Research and Consulting designed and administered this survey in a bipartisan manner for the Alliance for Excellent Education. The survey was conducted via telephone by professional interviewers and reached a total of one thousand likely voters nationwide. The survey was conducted June 15–23, 2010.

Download the complete summary of findings from the poll and the poll questionnaire at <http://bit.ly/9cmhVM>.

The Alliance held on a webinar on the findings from the poll that featured Alliance President Bob Wise, as well as pollsters Celinda Lake and Christine Matthews. To watch video or download audio from the webinar, click on the image to the right.



STRIKING A BALANCE: House Appropriations Subcommittee Falls Short of President Obama's Education Funding Goal

On July 15, a House of Representatives appropriations subcommittee fell short of meeting President Obama's funding goal for the competitive Race to the Top (RTT) and Investing in Innovation (I3) programs as it began its work on the bill that will fund the U.S. Department of Education in Fiscal Year (FY) 2011, which begins on October 1, 2010.

The bill, officially called the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education appropriations bill, would provide an overall total of \$71.9 billion for the Education Department in FY 2011. That amount represents an increase over last year's \$64.3 billion, but is \$1.5 billion less than President Obama requested in his FY 2011 budget.

In a [statement](#), **House Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman David Obey (D-WI)** lamented that the bill contained less funding than President Obama's budget request. "Given the needs of so many Americans living on the edge, I wish it were not so," Obey said. "But, the resources available to this subcommittee are limited. We can't do everything that might be useful, or everything the president or members of this subcommittee propose. But we should try to do what's most important."

Obey noted that the subcommittee tried to "strike a balance between maintaining broad-based federal assistance to schools and schoolchildren and advancing efforts to reform public education." For example, the bill provides a 3 percent increase in Title I grants and a 4 percent increase for special education. For the president's reform initiatives, it includes \$400 million for I3 grants, which is \$100 million less than the president's request. For RTT grants, the bill includes \$800 million, or \$550 million less than requested in the budget.

The bill appears to shift some of the money that could have gone for education reform to help address the effects of the recession that have been especially hard on young workers—Obey noted that [more than 25 percent of older teenagers are unemployed](#). To that end, the bill includes an additional \$250 million to support summer employment opportunities for about 100,000 young adults.

Republicans on the subcommittee offered [several amendments](#) that would have enacted across-the-board spending cuts. **Representative Jerry Lewis (R-CA), ranking Republican on the full**

committee, offered an amendment that would have set appropriations at FY08 levels while **Representative Denny Rehberg (R-MT)** proposed an amendment that would have set funding for the bill at last year's levels.

“At some point we need to get this spending under control, set priorities, and fund the ‘need to do’—not the ‘nice to do’—programs,” said **Representative Todd Tiahrt (R-KS), top Republican on the subcommittee**.

The bill will now go to the full House Appropriations Committee for review on a date that has yet to be announced. On the other side of the Capitol, the Senate Labor, HHS, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee is [scheduled to begin its work on the bill on Tuesday, July 27](#).



THE STATE OF STATE STANDARDS—AND THE COMMON CORE: Common Core State Standards Are Stronger than Current Standards in Three Quarters of States, New Report Finds

The [Common Core State Standards released on June 2](#) are stronger than English language arts (ELA) standards in thirty-seven states and math standards in thirty-nine states, according to a new report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The report, *The State of State Standards—and the Common Core—in 2010* also finds that the Common Core State Standards are better than both ELA and math standards in thirty-three of those states.

“The rigor and subject-matter content of the Common Core standards surpass most states’ standards in these subjects, though there are some intriguing exceptions,” said **Chester E. Finn, Jr., president of the Fordham Institute**. “As state officials decide whether to replace their present standards with the Common Core, we hope that they will consider this analysis. At the same time, they need to determine whether they have the capacity and will to implement whatever standards their states embrace. Rigorous standards are important, but they’re only the beginning.”

According to the report, only California, Indiana, and the District of Columbia have ELA standards that are clearly superior to those of the Common Core while eleven states are “too close to call,” meaning their standards are in the same league as the Common Core State Standards. The math standards in eleven states plus the District of Columbia were dubbed “too close to call.”

Already, [more than half of the states and the District of Columbia](#) have adopted the Common Core State Standards in ELA and math. In compiling the Fordham Institute report, content experts reviewed the ELA and math standards of the fifty states and the District of Columbia that were in place prior to adoption. They also reviewed the Common Core State Standards and assigned a letter grade to each. Reviewers gave a grade of “A” to the Common Core State Standards in math and a “B⁺” to the Common Core State Standards in ELA. Grades given to a selected group of states appear in the table below.

English Language Arts	Mathematics
Clearly Superior to the Common Core	Clearly Superior to the Common Core
California: A District of Columbia: A Indiana: A	None
Too Close to Call	Too Close to Call
Massachusetts: A ⁻ Tennessee: A ⁻ Texas: A ⁻ Common Core State Standards: B⁺ Colorado: B ⁺ Georgia: B ⁺ Louisiana: B ⁺ Oklahoma: B ⁺ Virginia: B ⁺ Alabama: B Arizona: B Florida: B	California: A District of Columbia: A Florida: A Indiana: A Washington: A Common Core State Standards: A⁻ Georgia: A ⁻ Michigan: A ⁻ Utah: A ⁻ Alabama: B ⁺ Massachusetts: B ⁺ Oklahoma: B ⁺ Oregon: B ⁺
Clearly Inferior to the Common Core	Clearly Inferior to the Common Core
16 States (HI, ID, KS, ME, MD, MN, NV, NH, NJ, NM, NY, OH, OR, SD, UT, WA): C 16 States (AR, CT, IL, KY, MI, MS, MO, NC, ND, PA, RI, SC, VT, WV, WI, WY): D 5 States (AK, DE, IA, MT, NE): F	6 States (AZ, DE, ID, MN, NY, WV): B 18 States (AR, CO, HI, IA, LA, ME, MI, NE, NV, NJ, NM, ND, OH, SC, SD, TN, TX, VA): C 9 States (AK, CT, IL, KY, MD, MI, NH, NC, RI): D 6 States (KS, MT, PA, VT, WI, WY): F

More information on the report is available at <http://bit.ly/ao4Uvq>.



LEARNING FROM LEADERSHIP: New Report Finds Effective School Leadership Is Strongly Connected to Student Achievement

A recent report from the Wallace Foundation presents new evidence confirming that strong school leadership, particularly in principals, is positively linked to student achievement. The report, *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning*, asserts that among school-related influences on student achievement, school leadership is second in importance only to classroom instruction.

The report stresses that leadership must be “collective” meaning a collaborated effort among educators, parents, students, principals, and community members. The combined influence of these stakeholders has a greater impact on student learning than any one leader, according to the study.

“The rubber hits the road in the classroom; that’s where the learning happens,” said **Kyla Wahlstrom, coauthor of the report and director of the Center for Applied Research and**

Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota. “Leadership is important because it sets the conditions and the expectations in the school that there will be excellent instruction and there will be a culture of ongoing learning for the educators and for the students in the school.”

Learning from Leadership also finds that higher-performing schools employ “fatter” decisionmaking structures, meaning that almost all people involved with the school have greater influence on school decisions as compared to their counterparts in lower-performing schools. Specifically, higher-performing schools award more influence to teacher teams, parents, and students and although principals are the central leaders in schools, they do not lose influence as others gain it. “Influence in schools is not a fixed sum or a zero-sum game,” the authors write.

In examining the different types of “shared leadership,” or situations in which staff members share responsibility for leading, the report highlights how principals and teachers are uniquely positioned to positively affect students’ classroom experiences. In fact, when teachers and principals share leadership, teachers’ working relationships are stronger and student achievement is higher. When this type of shared leadership is combined with principal work to improve instruction and teacher trust in principals, the results can lead to higher student scores on standardized math tests.

According to the study, shared leadership between teachers and principals is effective because of the role principals play in motivating teachers and in establishing suitable work conditions for them. The teachers and principals surveyed agree that three specific leadership practices contribute to improved teaching and learning: (1) focusing the school on goals and expectations for student achievement, (2) attending to teachers’ professional development needs, and (3) creating structures and opportunities for teacher collaboration.

Among the challenges to improving school leadership, the report cites high principal turnover, which results in negative effects on school culture and student achievement. Of the eighty schools examined in the study, the average principal tenure is little more than three-and-a-half years, which clashes with the general understanding that principals will serve in a school for at least five to seven years.

Another impediment is the lack of time principals have to spend on instructional leadership. This is particularly problematic in secondary schools due to the increased number of teachers and classes and principals’ severe time constraints. Secondary schools also struggle with school leadership issues because, compared to elementary school teachers, middle and high school teachers are less likely to trust their principals, less likely to report that they actively involve parents in decisions, and less active as instructional leaders in their buildings. In addition, high school teachers report lower ratings of school climate, openness to parents, and district support compared to their elementary school counterparts.

To overcome these problems, the report recommends that schools acknowledge the value of collective leadership and work to involve all educators in the decisionmaking processes. The report also encourages principals to play a pivotal role in motivating teachers and improving the work environment. Overall, the report states, it is very important for principals to coordinate or

link other educators' leadership efforts. Lastly, the report suggests reinventing the role of the principal so that he/she has more time to focus on improved instruction.

The report was conducted over a six-year period and includes data from nine states, forty-three school districts, and 180 schools. The researchers used surveys or interviews to reach educators at all levels including teachers, principals, district office personnel, school board members, community leaders, and state-level leaders.

To access the complete report or watch video commentary, visit <http://bit.ly/dlqGRC>.

New Report Examines How Leadership Can Raise Achievement and Narrow Gaps in Student Outcomes

A recent study from the Achievement Gap Initiative (AGI) at Harvard University examines how leadership teams at fifteen different public high schools worked together to significantly raise student outcomes and narrow achievement gaps. *How High Schools Become Exemplary: Ways that Leadership Raises Achievement and Narrows Gaps by Improving Instruction in 15 Public High Schools* features outstanding secondary schools from Massachusetts, Illinois, Ohio, Maryland, Texas, and Washington, DC.

According to the report, the leadership teams were successful by strategically focusing on improving the quality of education. These school leaders collaborated with other stakeholders, developed mission statements that provided accountability and benchmarks, carefully planned organized learning experiences for teachers, and clearly defined high-quality teaching and student work. One method that helped contribute to the schools' progress was engaging the whole faculty, a sentiment that is echoed in the *Learning from Leadership* study featured above.

To learn more about the AGI study, visit <http://www.agi.harvard.edu/events/2009Conference/2009AGIReport.php>.



A Summer Postcard from the Alliance for Excellent Education

Dear *Straight A's* Reader,

With schools around the country out for summer and Congress set to begin its August recess in a few days, the Alliance newsletter—although not the Alliance staff—will be taking a brief summer vacation during August.

The next issue of *Straight A's* will be on September 7. In the meantime, please visit the [Alliance website](#) and the Alliance's "[High School Soup](#)" blog for the latest education news and events.

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. 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>.