



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress

CORRECTION TO THE SEPTEMBER 7 ISSUE OF *STRAIGHT A'S*

Reporting on the Fiscal Year 2010 Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education appropriations bill, the [September 7 issue of *Straight A's*](#) noted that Senate Appropriations Committee included a provision directing 40 percent of School Improvement Grants program to be used to turn around the five thousand lowest-performing secondary schools, including the nation's "dropout factories," where 60 percent or fewer high school freshmen progress to senior year on time.

Instead, the text should have said that the committee directed states to spend *at least* 40 percent of School Improvement Grants on *improvement activities in middle and high schools*, including the approximately two thousand dropout factories. The Alliance apologizes for this error and regrets any confusion it may have caused.



GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS REPORT: United States's Slide Continues in Annual Ranking; Falls to Number Four

The United States fell two places to number four in the World Economic Forum (WEF) global competitiveness rankings released in a report earlier this month. Last year, after several years at the top of the rankings, the United States fell to second place behind Switzerland.

The Global Competitiveness Report 2010–2011 is the latest of WEF's annual reports on the key factors that determine economic growth and explain why some countries are more successful than others in raising income levels and opportunities for their populations. The report includes comprehensive listings of the main strengths and weaknesses of countries, making it possible to identify key priorities for policy reform.

A key feature of the report is the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), which ranks 139 countries based on these twelve pillars of competitiveness: institutions, infrastructure, macroeconomic environment, health and primary education, higher education and training, goods market efficiency, labor market efficiency, financial market development, technological readiness, market size, business sophistication, and innovation.

In writing about the United States's continued decline in its rankings, WEF notes that some of the nation's weaknesses have deepened since last year. For example, the evaluation of institutions has continued to decline; the United States ranks 54th in the public's trust of politicians and 68th in wastefulness of government spending.

2010–2011 GCI: Top Ten Countries

Rank	Country	Score	Last Year's Rank
1	Switzerland	5.63	1
2	Sweden	5.56	4
3	Singapore	5.48	3
4	United States	5.43	2
5	Germany	5.39	7
6	Japan	5.37	8
6	Finland	5.37	6
8	Netherlands	5.33	10
9	Denmark	5.32	5
10	Canada	5.30	9

Additionally, WEF notes that the United States continues to build up large sums of debt and had done so even before the global economic crisis. Now, the significant stimulus spending that accompanied the economic crisis has combined with repeated fiscal deficits to rapidly increase the level of public indebtedness. In the report, the United States ranks 117th in government budget balance, 122nd in government debt, and 130th in national savings rate.

Without a clear commitment to getting spending under control in the medium term, the report warns that countries such as the United States will compromise their future ability to make pro-growth investments in areas such as infrastructure, health, and education, which are necessary for sustained development and competitiveness over the longer term.

“Policymakers are struggling with ways of managing the present economic challenges while preparing their economies to perform well in a future economic landscape characterized by uncertainty and shifting balances,” said **Klaus Schwab, founder and executive chairman of WEF**. “In such a global economic environment, it is more important than ever for countries to put into place the fundamentals underpinning economic growth and development.”

WEF credits the United States for having companies that are highly sophisticated, innovative, and supported by an excellent university system that collaborates strongly with the business sector in research and development. When these qualities are combined with the scale opportunities afforded by the sheer size of the nation’s domestic economy—which is the largest in the world by far—the United States continues to be very competitive.

In education, the United States receives high marks for the percentage of individuals who enroll in higher education, but it does not place within the top ten in any other education indicator. Overall, WEF ranks the quality of the U.S. education system twenty-six, but, as shown in the table to the right, most of United States’s education indicators fare much worse.

2010–2011 GCI: U.S. Ranking in the Twelve Pillars

Pillar	Rank	Last Year’s Rank
Institutions	40	34
Infrastructure	15	8
Macroeconomic Stability	87	93
Health and Primary Education	42	36
Higher Education and Training	9	7
Goods Market Efficiency	26	12
Labor Market Efficiency	4	3
Financial Market Sophistication	31	20
Technological Readiness	17	13
Market Size	1	1
Business Sophistication	8	5
Innovation	1	1

2010–2011 GCI: U.S. Ranking in Education Indicators

Indicator	Rank
Quality of primary education	34
Primary education enrollment rate	79
Secondary education enrollment rate	45
Tertiary education enrollment rate	6
Quality of the education system	26
Quality of math and science education	52
Internet access in schools	14

“Workers who have received little formal education can carry out only simple manual work and find it much more difficult to adapt to more advanced production processes and techniques,” the report reads. “Lack of basic education can therefore become a constraint on business development, with firms finding it difficult to move up the value chain by producing more sophisticated or value-intensive products. For the longer term, it will be essential to avoid

significant reductions in resource allocation to these critical areas, in spite of the fact that government budgets will need to be cut to reduce public debt brought about by the present stimulus spending.”

The report adds that quality higher education and training is “crucial” for economies that want to move up the value chain beyond simple production processes and products. “In particular, today’s globalizing economy requires countries to nurture pools of well-educated workers who are able to adapt rapidly to their changing environment and the evolving needs of the production system,” the report reads.

The rankings are calculated from both publicly available data and the Executive Opinion Survey, a comprehensive annual survey conducted by WEF and its network of leading research institutes and business organizations located in the countries covered by the study. This year, over 13,500 business leaders were polled in 139 economies.

The complete report, which includes the United States’s ranking in each indicator, is available at http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GlobalCompetitivenessReport_2010-11.pdf.



NEW ALLIANCE BRIEF CALLS FOR GREATER FEDERAL ROLE TO CONFRONT LITERACY CRISIS IN MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS

Without a consistent commitment to delivering comprehensive reading and writing instruction throughout the pre-K–12 grade span, many low-income students and students of color will remain sidelined from full participation in the modern workplace, warns a new policy brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education. The brief, *The Federal Role in Confronting the Crisis in Adolescent Literacy*, notes that Congress has dedicated substantial funds to improving the reading skills of students in kindergarten through grade three, but this targeted investment has not resulted in the ultimate goal of preparing students to succeed in college and careers.

“The nation’s approach to teaching reading is analogous to a builder laying the foundation of a house, but not following through to assist with the walls, windows, doors, and roof,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “America’s students are getting help they need to become proficient readers in the early grades. Unfortunately they are not being supported in building vocabulary and comprehension skills needed to master the more complex materials they will encounter in middle and high school across all of their classes.”

According to the brief—made possible by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York—substantial research shows that around grade four students must move from *learning to read* to *reading to learn* as they encounter increasingly complex subject-matter material. Without ongoing content-area literacy support, however, many students lose ground because they lack the background knowledge and reading strategies necessary to comprehend the challenging concepts introduced in middle and high school.

This literacy problem affects many students, particularly low-income students and students of color. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 70 percent of eighth-grade students score below the “proficient” level in reading achievement. For students of

color and low-income students, the figures are even more disturbing as only 14 percent of African American, 17 percent of Hispanic, and 21 percent of Native American eighth graders score at or above the proficient level. When students cannot understand or evaluate text, provide relevant details, or support inferences about the written documents they read, they will likely be relegated to the ranks of unskilled workers in a world where literacy is an absolute precondition for success, the brief argues.

The brief also notes that the individual student is not the only one affected. Limited progress in improving literacy achievement of middle and high school students has “seriously compromised” the nation’s international standing and capacity to compete globally. Although students in grade four score among the best in the world in reading achievement, U.S. tenth-graders place close to the bottom among developed nations. During the last thirty-seven years, the literacy performance of thirteen- and seventeen-year-olds on NAEP has remained consistently low, with nearly six million of the twenty-two million American secondary students struggling to read and write.

The brief also highlights “extraordinary variability” in the number of students struggling to read both within and across states. For example, even if a state performs well on NAEP overall, a difference of nearly 25 percentage points exists between the percentage of white eighth graders and that of eighth graders in the state’s largest minority group scoring at the basic level. Partial blame for this lack of consistency on the level of performance students are expected to demonstrate lies with the No Child Left Behind Act, which permitted each state to develop its own standards, tests, and definition of proficiency. As a result, students with the same achievement levels might be considered proficient in one state but not in another.

Efforts are underway to bring more consistency across states. As evidence, the brief points to the Common Core State Standards for English language arts, led by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. These common standards provide a much-needed shared understanding of the essential literacy skills graduates need to succeed in college and the twenty-first-century workplace, and when paired with aligned assessments, can raise the level of literacy achievement for all students.

The federal government has also recognized the critical need to improve adolescent literacy by establishing the Striving Readers grant program, which supports literacy interventions in the upper grades. However, the program currently operates in only eight sites—six large school districts, one consortium of multiple rural districts, and one statewide education system for students in the juvenile justice system.

According to the brief, the pending reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—currently known as No Child Left Behind—offers the federal government the opportunity to invest fully in comprehensive literacy initiatives to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared with the advanced literacy skills necessary to succeed in college and careers. It offers four solutions to ensure that all students have the reading and comprehension skills needed to succeed in the modern world:

- Support the state-led adoption and implementation of common English language arts standards and aligned assessments that integrate literacy skills throughout subject areas.
- Support states and districts in developing comprehensive literacy plans for all students.

- Encourage states to strengthen teacher education and licensure through the design of performance-based systems that ensure that teachers acquire competencies in literacy instruction.
- Invest in ongoing research and evaluation, particularly to provide more definitive guidance on programs for English learners, identify evidence-based instructional strategies, and evaluate approaches for improving teaching effectiveness.

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

New Research Report Evaluates Effectiveness of Reading Programs for Adolescent Readers

In an effort to provide more research on the needs of adolescent readers and the effective interventions that can address these needs, the U.S. Department of Education began the Enhanced Reading Opportunities (ERO) study. ERO is a demonstration and rigorous evaluation of supplemental literacy programs targeted to ninth-grade students whose reading skills are at least two years below grade level.

As part of the demonstration, six thousand ninth graders from thirty-four high schools in ten school districts were given one of two reading interventions: Reading Apprenticeship Academic Literacy, designed by WestEd and Xtreme Reading, designed by the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning. These programs were implemented in the study schools for two school years. MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization, conducted the evaluation in partnership with the American Institutes for Research and Survey Research Management.

The first two reports for the study evaluate the programs' impact on students' reading skills and their reading behaviors at the end of ninth grade. The most recent and final report in the study, *The Enhanced Reading Opportunities Study Final Report: The Impact of Supplemental Literacy Courses for Struggling Ninth-Grade Readers*, finds that ERO programs improved students' reading comprehension skills over the course of ninth grade and helped them perform better in their high school course work. However, these benefits did not persist in the following school year, when students were no longer receiving the supports provided by the ERO programs.

Specifically, students in the reading programs moved from the 23rd percentile to the 25th percentile nationally. At the same time, however, 77 percent of students assigned to an ERO class were still reading at two or more years below grade level at the end of ninth grade. Students' grade point average (GPA) in core subject areas (English language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics) was 0.06 points higher, or 13 percent, as a result of being assigned to an ERO program. The programs also helped students earn 0.6 percentage points more of the core credits that they need to graduate.

On the downside, the estimated impact on students' GPA in core subject areas, credit accumulation, and standardized state test scores were not statistically significant in the school year following program participation (tenth grade for most students). Additionally, the ERO programs did not increase students' vocabulary scores, reading behaviors, student attendance rates, or reduce suspensions in either the program year or the following year.

In discussing the study, **Marsha Silverberg, program officer at the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, which was responsible for oversight of the evaluation**, said it was important to remember the very low reading skills of the students in the study. "When we put out the call, we said [participants should read] at least two years behind, but I would think the students we ended up with had even lower reading skills than they expected," she told [Education Week](#). "Remember, literacy doesn't get taught in high school, it doesn't even get taught in middle school. Explicit literacy basically stops in fifth grade. Is one year of a program enough to get these students on track to be adept readers when all their lives they weren't adept readers?"

The complete report is available at <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/565/full.pdf>.



2010 COLLEGE-BOUND SENIORS: SAT Scores Show Little to No Progress

Average national SAT scores for the high school Class of 2010 remained virtually unchanged compared to last year, according to a new report from the College Board. The critical reading average stayed at 501, the math average increased by 1 point to 516, and the writing average decreased by one point to 492. Each section of the SAT is scored on a scale of 200 to 800 points.

2010 College-Bound Seniors: Total Group Profile Report shows that over the past ten years, the average scores in reading and math have fluctuated slightly with a decline and/or stagnation in scores starting in 2005. Writing scores have moderately declined since 2006, when writing scores were first reported for college-bound seniors.

In total, 1.59 million students in the Class of 2010 took the test, which, according to the College Board, is more students than in any other graduating class in history. Minority students now comprise 42 percent of SAT takers, up from 40 percent in 2009 and 28.6 percent in 2000.

Total Group Mean SAT

Year	Critical Reading	Mathematics	Writing
2000	505	514	-
2001	506	514	-
2002	504	516	-
2003	507	519	-
2004	508	518	-
2005	508	520	-
2006	503	518	497
2007	502	515	494
2008	502	515	494
2009	501	515	493
2010	501	516	492

However, the score breakdown by ethnicity shows that Hispanic and black students are still trailing their white and Asian peers. In reading, white students scored an average of 528 and Asian students scored an average of 519, while black students scored an average of 429 and Mexican, Puerto Rican, and other Hispanic students scored an average of 454. In math and writing, Asian students had the highest average scores (591 and 521) while black students had the lowest average scores (428 and 420).

Historically, male students have performed modestly better than female students in reading and significantly better in math. This year, males outscored females by 5 points in reading and by 34 points in math. In writing, females continue to score higher than males with an advantage this year of 12 points.

Another trend that has persisted throughout the years is the link between reported family income and SAT scores. Across all three SAT subject areas, students from higher-income families performed better than students from lower-income families. This trend was present at every point on family income scale that ranged from \$0-\$20,000 to more than \$200,000. Similarly, students performed increasingly better on the SAT as their parents' level of educational attainment increases. Students whose parents did not graduate from high school scored on average a 422 in reading, a 446 in math, and a 419 in writing, while students whose parents received a bachelor's degree, scored on average 99, 90, and 93 points higher respectively in those subjects.

The report finds that students who reported taking a core curriculum—defined as four or more years of English, three or more years of mathematics, three or more years of natural science, and three or more years of social studies or history—scored 151 points higher than those who did

not. Additionally, students taking rigorous classes, such as honors or Advanced Placement courses, performed better on the SAT than those who did not.

“Engaging students with more rigorous course work and demanding higher standards are critical in providing America’s students with an education that will prepare them to compete in the twenty-first-century economy,” said **College Board President Gaston Caperton**. “This report confirms that there are no tricks and no shortcuts to college readiness. Students who take more rigorous courses in high school are more prepared to succeed in college and beyond.”

The College Board points out that it has been a partner in the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), a state-led effort to establish a single set of clear educational standards for K–12 English language arts and mathematics. The standards are designed to ensure that students graduating from high school are prepared to go to college or enter the workforce. Currently, [37 states](#) have adopted the standards.

“It is critical that all students—especially those traditionally underrepresented in higher education—have access to curriculum that best prepares them for college,” said **Laurence Bunin, senior vice president of the College Board’s College Connection and Success System**. “That is why the College Board has worked so closely on the Common Core State Standards Initiative and why we have expanded our fee-waiver program. Every student in America should have access to a world-class education that will prepare them to compete in a global economy.”

The College Board provides SAT fee waivers to low-income students; one out of every five students in the 2010 SAT-taking class utilized these services.

2010 College-Bound Seniors: Total Group Profile Report includes results from students in the Class of 2010 who took the SAT through March 2010. To read the full national report or individual state summaries, visit <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/data-reports-research/sat/cb-seniors-2010>.

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>.