



ALLIANCE FOR  
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

# Straight A's

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## **OBAMA ADMINISTRATION RELEASES ESEA BLUEPRINT: Proposal to Overhaul NCLB Centers on Raising Standards, Focusing Attention on the Lowest-Performing Schools**

On March 15, the Obama administration released its blueprint to overhaul the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). In a March 13 [video address to the nation](#) that previewed the blueprint, President Obama said the plan sets an ambitious goal that all students should graduate from high school prepared for college and careers no matter who they are or where they come from. Obama acknowledged that achieving the goal will be difficult, but is essential for the country and its children.



“As a nation, we are engaged in many important endeavors: improving the economy, reforming the health care system, encouraging innovation in energy and other growth industries of the twenty-first century,” Obama said. “But our success in these efforts—and our success in the future as a people—will ultimately depend on what happens long before an entrepreneur opens his doors, or a nurse walks the rounds, or a scientist steps into her laboratory. Our future is determined each and every day when our children enter the classroom, ready to learn and brimming with promise. It’s that promise we must help them fulfill.”

In [testimony before the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan](#) said that the blueprint is organized around the Obama administration’s three major goals for ESEA reauthorization—raising standards, rewarding excellence and growth, and increasing local control and flexibility.

### **Raising Standards: College and Career Ready is the New Goal**

The administration’s blueprint makes clear that the goal of the American educational system is to graduate every student from high school ready for college and a career. It notes that while states have developed and implemented standards under NCLB, the standards in many states do not reflect the knowledge and skills needed for success after high school. Rather than continuing NCLB’s requirement that by 2014, all students be proficient in reading and math as judged by the current standards—which tend to be lower—the blueprint raises the bar by requiring all students to graduate or be on track to graduate from high school ready for college and careers by 2020.

To raise expectations for students, the blueprint calls on states to develop and adopt college- and career-ready standards in English language arts and mathematics, and gives them the option to work with other states to develop and adopt common, state-developed standards or upgrade their existing standards. If states choose to upgrade their existing standards, they must collaborate with their four-year public university system to certify that mastery of the standards ensures that a student will not need to take remedial course work in college.

### **Turning Around Low-Performing Schools**

The blueprint groups schools, school districts, and states into different categories based on how well they are educating students. Schools, districts, and states that successfully reach performance targets, significantly increase student performance for all students, close achievement gaps, or turn around the lowest-performing schools would be recognized as “Reward” schools, districts, and states. States would receive funds to reward high-poverty Reward schools and districts. Possible rewards include financial compensation for the staff and students or flexibility in the use of ESEA funds, among others.

“Challenge” states, districts, and schools, which would be identified by states, would be at the other end of the spectrum. The first category of Challenge schools would include the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools in each state based on student academic achievement, student growth, and graduation rates. These schools would be required to implement one of four school turn-around models to support better outcomes for students: (1) transformation, (2) turn around, (3) restart, or (4) school closure. If one of the lowest-performing schools is located in a Reward school district, the district would be given the flexibility to implement a fifth intervention model.

Under the transformation model, a Challenge school would replace the principal, strengthen staffing, implement a research-based instructional program, provide extended learning time, and implement new governance and flexibility. The turn-around model is very similar with the primary difference being that the school could rehire no more than 50 percent of the school staff.

If a Challenge school chooses the restart model, it would need to convert or close and reopen under the management of an effective charter operator, charter management organization, or education management organization. Under the school closure model, the school would close and students who attended it would be enrolled in a higher-performing school in the district.

School districts and their partners would receive three-year awards to fully implement one of these intervention models and would be eligible for two additional years of funding to support a school’s ongoing improvement if it is showing progress. In addition, the U.S. Secretary of Education would reserve a portion of federal school turn-around funds to enhance state, district, and nonprofit capacities to improve schools.

The second category of Challenge schools would include the next 5 percent of low-performing schools. These schools would be placed in a warning category, and states and districts would be required to implement research-based, locally determined strategies to help them improve. Schools that are not closing significant, persistent achievement gaps would make up a third category of Challenge schools. In these schools, districts would be required to implement data-driven interventions to help students who are furthest behind and close the achievement gap. (For

more information on the school categories, download the Alliance for Excellent Education's summary at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/SchoolImprovementChart.pdf>.

“The administration’s blueprint places an important focus on the lowest-performing schools, including the lowest-performing high schools,” [said Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia](#). “Half of the nation’s dropouts come from two thousand high schools. We know where these schools are, and we know how to fix them. The president’s proposal sets us on a path for doing so. The blueprint would upgrade NCLB by holding schools accountable, not just for test scores, but for graduation rates as well. It also provides a more specific menu of interventions to turn around the lowest-performing schools. Current law points out the problem but falls far short of delivering a cure.”

The proposal to group schools into different categories has also received a fair amount of criticism, with opponents arguing that not all schools will be accountable for student performance as they are under NCLB. In an [op-ed for the Dallas Morning News](#), **Margaret Spellings, U.S. Secretary of Education from 2004 to 2008**, credits the blueprint for building on existing initiatives to reward achievement in the classroom, focusing on college readiness, and measuring teacher effectiveness, but also writes that the blueprint would remove annual yearly progress requirements that all schools must make. “No longer would every school be responsible for improving the progress of its students,” she writes. “The administration’s blueprint says that up to 90 percent of schools could escape accountability for the performance of all students.”

When asked during a March 15 [conference call with reporters](#) whether there would be federal accountability for schools above the lowest 10 percent, Duncan said, “We want to hold those schools in the middle accountable for continued progress and really let local educators demonstrate their ability to do the right thing by children.” Later during the call, Duncan was asked whether there would be pressure from the federal government for schools in the middle—i.e. not Challenge or Reward schools—to improve. In response, he said, “There is significant pressure because again, we’re looking at growth. If those schools start to stagnate, they’re going to end up in that bottom category. If they are stagnating and achievement gaps aren’t closing, they will by definition drop into that bottom bucket. And so every school has to be looking to get better; every school has to be improving; every school has to have a plan.”

### **Assessments and Accountability**

Under the blueprint, the federal government would support the development and use of a “new generation of assessments” that are aligned with the new standards in English language arts and math to better determine whether students have acquired the skills they need to succeed. According to the blueprint, assessments under the current system “do not adequately measure student growth or the knowledge and skills that students need, nor do they provide timely, useful information to teachers.” The new assessment system would provide more accurate measures of student growth and better inform classroom instruction to respond to academic needs.

To help foster public accountability for results, states would need to have data systems in place to collect and publicize data relating to student academic achievement and growth in English language arts and mathematics, and student academic achievement in science. At the high school level, states would collect graduation rates, college enrollment rates, and the rates of college

enrollment without need for remediation. All data would need to be disaggregated by race, gender, ethnicity, disability status, English learner status, and family income.

To “raise the bar and promote excellence,” the blueprint would continue Race to the Top’s incentives for systemic reforms at the state level and expands the eligibility to school districts. It backs public school choice by supporting the expansion of high-performing public charter schools and increasing access to college-level, dual-credit, and other accelerated courses in high-need schools. The blueprint also supports college-going strategies and models that would help students succeed.

To promote innovation and continuous improvement, the blueprint contains an Investing in Innovation Fund that would help local and nonprofit leaders develop and scale up effective programs. It also consolidates programs into fewer, larger, and more flexible funding streams that would allow states and districts to focus on the needs that are specific to their area. The blueprint prioritizes programs that include a comprehensive redesign of the school day, week, or year, as well as programs that promote schools as centers of communities or partner with community organizations.

### **Effective Teachers and Leaders**

The blueprint calls on states and school districts to develop and implement systems of teacher and principal evaluation and support that would also identify effective and highly effective teachers and principals based on student growth and other factors. Statewide definitions of “effective teacher,” “effective principal,” “highly effective teacher,” and “highly effective principal” that are significantly based on student growth and other measures, such as classroom observations of practice, would be developed in collaboration with teachers, principals, and other stakeholders. Additionally, state-led data systems would link information on teacher and principal preparation programs to the job placement, student growth, and retention outcomes of their graduates. At the district-level, evaluation systems would differentiate teachers and principals by effectiveness across at least three performance levels.

States and districts would be required to publish report cards at least every two years that provide information on key indicators, such as teacher qualifications and teacher and principal designations of effectiveness, teachers and principals hired from high-performing pathways, teacher survey data on levels of support and working conditions in schools, the novice status of teachers and principals, teacher and principal attendance, and retention rates of teachers by performance level. States would also be required to report on the performance of teacher and principal preparation programs by their graduates’ impact on student growth and other measures, job placement, and retention.

The blueprint also includes a new teacher and leader innovation fund that would provide competitive grants for states and school districts to recruit, place, reward, retain, and promote effective teachers and principals, focusing on improving teachers and principal effectiveness in high-need schools. In an effort to improve access to effective teachers and principals in high-needs schools, it calls on states and school districts to track equitable access to effective teachers and principals and, where necessary, take steps to improve access in high-poverty, high-minority schools.

Under the teacher and leader innovation fund, grantees could use funds to reform compensation systems to provide differentiated compensation and career advancement opportunities to educators who increase student academic achievement, take on additional roles and responsibilities in their schools, and teach in high-need schools, subjects, areas, and fields. Grantees could also use funds to staff high-need schools more effectively, such as through the implementation or use of earlier hiring timelines. States and districts would be encouraged to use these funds to take on additional innovative reforms, such as improving teacher salary schedules to eliminate incentives for teachers to obtain credentials that are not linked to improved student performance.

The administration's blueprint did not get a favorable review from the nation's teachers' unions. [Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said](#) the proposal "places 100 percent of the responsibility on teachers and gives them zero percent of the authority." [Dennis Van Roekel, president of the National Education Association, said](#) that the blueprint still relies on standardized tests to identify winners and losers and took issue with the school turn-around models. "We were expecting school turn-around efforts to be research-based and fully collaborative," he said. "Instead, we see too much top-down scapegoating of teachers and not enough collaboration. It's just not a solution to say, 'Let's get rid of half the staff. If there's a high-crime neighborhood, you don't fire the police officers. This is a huge issue for us.'"

During his conference call with reporters, Duncan addressed the criticism from the teachers' unions. He called Weingarten and Van Roekel "real reformers" and said he would continue to work with them because they have an "absolute commitment there to challenge the status quo and get better." He added that, "What maybe they didn't fully see ... or fully understand is how much [the blueprint] is now a shared responsibility." Duncan also referenced the \$350 million increase in funding for teachers and leaders that is designed to give teachers the "support, the time for collaboration, the mentoring, the better career ladders—all those things that teachers need to be successful and that haven't happened."

Reaction from key education leaders in Congress was generally more positive and indicated that Duncan's goal of a bipartisan reauthorization of ESEA in 2010 was reachable. "President Obama has outlined a bold vision for reform that puts our efforts to rewrite our education laws on strong footing," [said Representative George Miller \(D-CA\), chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee](#). "Congress now has an incredible opportunity to help reshape the future of this country by overhauling No Child Left Behind and finally ensuring a world-class education for every single child in this country. This blueprint lays the right markers to help us reset the bar for our students and the nation."

[Representative John Kline \(R-MN\), top Republican on the House Education and Labor Committee, said the blueprint](#) "identifies many of the right goals for improving our schools and helping all students achieve their fullest potential. With these shared goals as a starting point, there are clearly still major differences from across the spectrum about the best path forward. Whether it's federal pressure to adopt national standards or prescriptive reporting and school management requirements, this blueprint has already sparked strong debate. While I have questions and concerns about many of the specific proposals—particularly those that increase federal intrusion into our schools—I welcome the opportunity to continue debating what it means to ensure educational excellence now and into the future."

Download the blueprint from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/index.html>.



## **PRIMARY SOURCES: America's Teachers Say Students Are Leaving High School Unprepared for the Challenges Ahead**

Approximately 93 percent of teachers agree that a high school diploma is not enough for today's students to succeed, according to a widespread survey commissioned by Scholastic, Inc. and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Unfortunately, the report, [\*Primary Sources: America's Teachers on America's Schools\*](#) also finds that about 90 percent of teachers believe that not all of their students are leaving high school prepared for the rigors of a two- or four-year college. The report provides a snapshot of teacher opinion on the state of K–12 American education and covers a variety of issues ranging from academic standards to performance pay to use of technology.

“Teachers are a critical part of preparing our children for the future, and their voices are an essential addition to the national debate on education,” said **Margery Mayer, executive vice president and president at Scholastic Education**. “Since teachers are the frontline of delivering education in the classroom, the reform movement will not succeed without their active support. *Primary Sources* is a step in ensuring that teachers’ voices are a part of this important conversation.”

According to the report, teachers identified five solutions for ensuring that all students achieve at their highest level. Recommendations include establishing clear standards that are common across states, employing multiple measures to evaluate student performance, using tailored instruction to reach individual students’ skills and interests, accurately measuring teacher performance and providing nonmonetary rewards, and bridging the gap between school and home to raise student achievement.

The majority of teachers surveyed supported standards on one level or another. Ninety-five percent said that establishing “clearer academic standards” would make at least a moderate impact on improving achievement and 90 percent said “the establishment of common standards across all states” would have the same effect.

Although teachers value standardized tests as a method to improve student achievement, they also voiced their opinion that tests were only one part of the equation. According to the report, teachers believe that the most important evaluation measures are ongoing assessments during class coupled with class participation and performance on class assignments. Most educators then use this performance data to inform their instruction, start conversations about student outcomes with parents or collaborating teachers, and monitor student and classroom progress.

When surveyed on innovation, 94 percent of teachers said that learning experiences that provide students with twenty-first-century skills are “absolutely essential” (54 percent) or “very important” (40 percent) in impacting student achievement. To provide these types of relevant experiences, teachers said they strive to meet students “where they are” on both a personal interest and ability level in addition to incorporating technology in their curriculum. Customized learning experiences also play an important role in engaging students; nearly 95 percent of



teachers said differentiated assignments help to engage students in learning and 90 percent said that teaching resources to assist differentiated instruction are either “absolutely essential” (53 percent) or “very important” (37 percent).

As for factors outside of the classroom that could affect student success, teachers agreed that lack of student motivation (34 percent) and lack of encouragement from family and friends (27 percent) were likely reasons that some students would leave high school unprepared for a two- or four-year college. High school teachers (49 percent) were more likely than elementary school teachers (25 percent) to view motivating students as a challenge and identified it as the single most likely reason that students are unprepared for higher education.

When asked about the most important factors affecting teacher retention, nearly all teachers cited nonmonetary rewards such as supportive leadership, time to collaborate with other teachers, and access to high-quality curriculum and resources. Pay tied to teacher performance ranked the lowest on the list, with 36 percent of teachers saying it is “not important at all” and only 25 percent saying it is “absolutely essential” or “very important.”

*Primary Sources* finds that teachers perceive students to be increasingly less prepared for grade-level work as they enter the higher grades; only 12 percent of high school teachers agreed that students begin the school year prepared for on-grade-level work compared to only 18 percent of elementary school teachers.

A comparison of teachers in low-income areas versus high-income areas revealed a noticeable difference in opinion regarding a students’ ability to perform well in school and beyond. Teachers in low-income schools are about one-third as likely as teachers in high-income schools to rate student achievement as “excellent.” They are also half as likely to say more than 75 percent of their students could leave high school ready for college success.

To read the full results, visit <http://www.scholastic.com/primarysources>.

***The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Collaborating for Student Success: Release Event for Part Three: Teaching as a Career***

On Wednesday, March 24, the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future will host **U.S. Senator Jack Reed (D-RI), AFT President Randi Weingarten, Lily Eskelsen, vice president of the National Education Association**, and a panel of teachers from Howard County, Maryland and Stafford County, Virginia to respond to key findings from part three of the *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Collaborating for Student Success: Teaching as a Career*.

Breakfast starts at 8:30 a.m. and the program will begin promptly at 9:00 a.m. in the Ticonderoga Room at the Hyatt Regency Washington Hotel, 400 New Jersey Avenue, NW, Washington, DC. To RSVP, email [rbrookshire@nctaf.org](mailto:rbrookshire@nctaf.org) or call 202-429-2570. More information is available at <http://www.nctaf.org>.

***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>.

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Although teachers value standardized tests as a method to improve student achievement, they also voiced their opinion that tests were only one part of the equation. According to the report, teachers believe that the most important evaluation measures are ongoing assessments during class coupled with class participation and performance on class assignments. Most educators then use this performance data to inform their instruction, start conversations about student outcomes with parents or collaborating teachers, and monitor student and classroom progress.

When surveyed on innovation, 94 percent of teachers said that learning experiences that provide students with twenty-first-century skills are “absolutely essential” (54 percent) or “very important” (40 percent) in impacting student achievement. To provide these types of relevant experiences, teachers said they strive to meet students “where they are” on both a personal interest and ability level in addition to incorporating technology in their curriculum. Customized learning experiences also play an important role in engaging students; nearly 95 percent of

teachers said differentiated assignments help to engage students in learning and 90 percent said that teaching resources to assist differentiated instruction are either “absolutely essential” (53 percent) or “very important” (37 percent).

As for factors outside of the classroom that could affect student success, teachers agreed that lack of student motivation (34 percent) and lack of encouragement from family and friends (27 percent) were likely reasons that some students would leave high school unprepared for a two- or four-year college. High school teachers (49 percent) were more likely than elementary school teachers (25 percent) to view motivating students as a challenge and identified it as the single most likely reason that students are unprepared for higher education.

When asked about the most important factors affecting teacher retention, nearly all teachers cited nonmonetary rewards such as supportive leadership, time to collaborate with other teachers, and access to high-quality curriculum and resources. Pay tied to teacher performance ranked the lowest on the list, with 36 percent of teachers saying it is “not important at all” and only 25 percent saying it is “absolutely essential” or “very important.”

*Primary Sources* finds that teachers perceive students to be increasingly less prepared for grade-level work as they enter the higher grades; only 12 percent of high school teachers agreed that students begin the school year prepared for on-grade-level work compared to only 18 percent of elementary school teachers.

A comparison of teachers in low-income areas versus high-income areas revealed a noticeable difference in opinion regarding a students’ ability to perform well in school and beyond. Teachers in low-income schools are about one-third as likely as teachers in high-income schools to rate student achievement as “excellent.” They are also half as likely to say more than 75 percent of their students could leave high school ready for college success.

To read the full results, visit <http://www.scholastic.com/primarysources>.

***The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Collaborating for Student Success: Release Event for Part Three: Teaching as a Career***

On Wednesday, March 24, the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future will host **U.S. Senator Jack Reed (D-RI), AFT President Randi Weingarten, Lily Eskelsen, vice president of the National Education Association**, and a panel of teachers from Howard County, Maryland and Stafford County, Virginia to respond to key findings from part three of the *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Collaborating for Student Success: Teaching as a Career*.

Breakfast starts at 8:30 a.m. and the program will begin promptly at 9:00 a.m. in the Ticonderoga Room at the Hyatt Regency Washington Hotel, 400 New Jersey Avenue, NW, Washington, DC. To RSVP, email [rbrookshire@nctaf.org](mailto:rbrookshire@nctaf.org) or call 202-429-2570. More information is available at <http://www.nctaf.org>.

***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>.