



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



STANDARD RESPONSE: Senate HELP Committee Chairman and Top Republican Agree that Standards Movement Needs to Be Led by States, Not Federal Government

On April 28, the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee continued its hearings on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—currently known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB)—when it heard from witnesses on the role that standards and assessments play in the American education system.

While opening the hearing on standards and assessments, **Senate HELP Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA)** explained that having a clear understanding of what students need to learn and developing ways to accurately assess their progress is a vital component of preparing students for success after high school graduation.

“As we have heard time and time again, our economic success in the next century is directly tied to our ability to have a highly educated, highly skilled workforce,” he said. “Adopting high-quality standards and assessments is an important first step to that end.”



During his [opening statement](#), Harkin briefly traced the role of standards in the American education system, beginning with the 1983 [A Nation at Risk report](#), which highlights the need for rigorous standards in the nation’s schools, and ending with the passage of NCLB in 2002, which requires that all students within a given state be held to the same high standards.

“These standards helped to end a two-tiered system that meant lower expectations for disadvantaged students,” Harkin explained. “However, the standards did not ensure that students were being prepared for success after high school graduation.” Consequently, Harkin sees “serious improvements” that are necessary as Congress works to reauthorize the law, including the need for standards that are not “false benchmarks” but prepare students for success whether they choose to go to college or enter a career.

“The good news is that, once again, states are taking the lead, with the vast majority already working together to create college- and career-ready standards,” Harkin said. He praised the state-led effort to create college- and career-ready standards and offered several reasons why it “makes sense” for states to work together to develop common standards. Specifically, he listed increased mobility among students, the need for students to compete globally, equity, economies

of scale, and teacher preparation. “How can schools of education properly prepare teachers to teach to standards if those standards may be significantly different in the state where the teacher ends up teaching after graduation?” Harkin asked.

Harkin also blamed multiple sets of standards for the low-quality of the nation’s assessments and suggested that the federal government should support state efforts to move to higher-quality assessments. “One reason for the low-quality of our assessments is that we have paid to create them fifty times over, each time slightly adjusting them to meet a different set of state standards,” he said. “Paying once for a much higher quality set of assessments that really meet the needs of all students would be a much better investment.”

Like Harkin, **Mike Enzi (R-WY), the top Republican on the Senate HELP Committee**, also believes that the common core standards initiative is best led by the states. “I’ve said for many years that students need to be provided with knowledge and skills they need to be successful in college and the workforce,” Enzi said. “The common core standards developed by the states, if implemented and adopted properly, could finally move our country in that direction. However, the federal government should stay out of the way of these efforts. As we work on the reauthorization of ESEA, we should find ways to assist states, not require or coerce them with this difficult but important work.”

In discussing some of his priorities for reauthorizing ESEA, Enzi mentioned the need to “maintain the high standard” of including all students in single statewide accountability systems. He credited NCLB for helping to raise the performance of students both individually and in student subgroups, as well as for narrowing the achievement gap between high- and low-achieving students. “We cannot stop moving in this direction now as we continue to prepare our students, rich or poor, with or without disabilities, or English language learners for postsecondary education or employment in the global economy,” he said.

Enzi also called for growth models and new assessments better aligned to standards that will allow for improved measurements of student growth from year to year, but stressed the need to continue regular assessments that “summarize the development of students so that we know how a student has done over the course of each year.” He agreed with Harkin on the importance of supporting state systems of assessment that would include various assessment models. He said teachers could use these assessments to better inform the work they do in the classroom.

In closing, Enzi cautioned that Congress not work too fast on ESEA reauthorization. “Our work on the reauthorization of ESEA must be done carefully and deliberately to foster and support the changes,” he said. “NCLB is often criticized for its unintended consequences. If we’re not thoughtful, and instead work quickly because we’re trying to meet artificial deadlines, we could wind up being criticized more than we are now.”

The hearing’s first witness, **Steven Paine, West Virginia state superintendent of schools and president of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)**, provided greater detail on the Common Core State Standards Initiative, led by CCSSO and the National Governors Association, as well as state efforts to develop high-quality assessments that are aligned to the standards.

In developing the common core standards, participating states received support from leading standards experts who collaborated with a range of interested stakeholders from across the country, Paine said. Additionally, the process included numerous opportunities for public comment and benefited from feedback from individual school teachers and leaders, national education organizations, higher education representatives, and civil rights groups, among others.

Phase one of the process concluded in fall 2009 when the common college- and career-readiness standards, which represent what students should know and be able to do at the end of high school, were released. Since that time, the second phase of the process has focused on “back-mapping” the college- and career-ready standards on a grade-by-grade basis for Kindergarten through twelfth grade. Paine said the final grade-by-grade standards in English language arts and mathematics were scheduled to be released in May.

Turning to assessments, Paine said that groups of states are forming collaborative groups around the development of common, high-quality assessments that will measure student knowledge against the full range of college- and career-ready standards. He added that these advanced assessment systems will represent the next generation of summative, formative, and interim assessments, which will “significantly improve teaching and learning” by providing “unprecedented insights” into students’ statuses and growth.

During his testimony, Paine said it is “imperative” that the Common Core State Standards Initiative remains a state-led process to preserve the project’s integrity, but he added that there are appropriate steps the federal government could take to support state and local leadership. He said a reauthorized ESEA should include a new state-federal partnership that promotes innovation and values state judgment on accountability.

Paine also explained that the current accountability system under NCLB will undercut the movement toward high standards and must be updated to reflect the evolution of standards-based reform. “By adopting the college- and career-ready common core standards, states are voluntarily raising the bar for all students,” he said. “The federal government should acknowledge their leadership by providing greater flexibility to help states ensure that all students meet these new, higher expectations, particularly as they transition their state accountability systems to the common core.”

The second witness, **Cynthia Schmeiser, president of ACT’s education division**, presented ACT’s research on college and career readiness. She explained that career readiness requires the same level of foundational knowledge and skills in math and reading as college readiness. “The level of knowledge and skills students need when they graduate from high school is the same whether they plan to enter postsecondary education or a workforce training program for jobs that offer salaries above the poverty line,” she said.

ACT defines college readiness as a student having the knowledge and skills necessary to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing, first-year courses at a postsecondary institution. “Simply stated, readiness for college means not needing to take remedial courses in postsecondary education or

training programs,” Schmeiser said. “Compared to high school graduates who are not college and career ready, those who are ready to enter credit-bearing college courses are more likely to enroll in college, stay in college, earn good grades, and persist to a college degree.”

Based on research from ACT, far too many of the nation’s high school graduates are not prepared for success. Schmeiser said one third of the 1.5 million high school graduates who took the ACT during the 2008–09 academic year were not ready for college-level English. Additionally, 47 percent were not ready for college social science, 58 percent were not ready for college algebra, and 72 percent were not ready for college biology. Overall, only 23 percent of graduates were ready to enter college-level courses without remediation in any of the four subject areas.

In his testimony, **Gary Phillips, vice president at American Institutes for Research**, explained why large numbers of students are graduating unprepared for college by focusing on what he called a large loophole in NCLB—one has encouraged states to “dumb down” their performance standards to get high rates of proficiency. As a result, many states show high percentages of students scoring proficient on their state tests, yet the same students receive low scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

“The gap in expectations in the state performance standards is not just a minor accounting irregularity,” Phillips said. “It has real equity consequences for a student’s opportunity to learn. If my child attends school in a state where almost everyone is proficient, what leverage do I have as a parent to ask the state to provide a more challenging education?”

Phillips argued that the expectations gap helps to explain why the United States does poorly on international comparisons. As he explained, many states think they are doing well and feel no urgency to improve because almost all of their students are proficient. Meanwhile, 40 percent of students entering college need remedial courses. “They thought they were college ready because they passed their high school graduation test—but they were not,” he said.

The hearing’s final two witnesses, **Charlene Rivera, executive director at the George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education**, and **Martha Thurlow, director of the National Center on Educational Outcomes**, testified on how ESEA reauthorization, as well as common standards and assessments can better address the needs of English language learners and students with disabilities, respectively.

[Read witness testimony or watch video of the April 28 hearing.](#)

Mark Your Calendar: Additional ESEA Hearings

On May 4 at 2:00 p.m. (EST), the Senate HELP Committee will hold a hearing on ESEA reauthorization focusing on how to improve America’s middle and high schools. To download a primer from the Alliance for Excellent Education on the hearing, visit http://www.all4ed.org/publication_materials/ESEAHearingPrimers. More information on the hearing is available at <http://tinyurl.com/3xc5dal>.

At the same time, on the other side of the Capitol, the House Education and Labor Committee will hold a hearing to examine how to best support teachers and leaders in schools. More information on that hearing is available at <http://tinyurl.com/2utajpd>.



THE CASE FOR COMMON STANDARDS: New Profiles from the Alliance for Excellent Education Examine Need for (and Potential of) Common Standards and Assessments

In spring 2009, the Common Core State Standards Initiative was launched with forty-eight states, the District of Columbia, and two territories coming together under the auspices of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to develop a common core of state K–12 English language arts and mathematics standards. New state profiles from the Alliance for Excellent Education offer evidence for why all states need improved standards and assessments while also examining the potential benefits of educating all students to meet common college- and career-ready standards.

“Zip codes might be great for sorting mail, but they’re no way to educate America’s future workforce,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Under the current education system, there is wide variation between states and even school districts on what students are expected to know and do—a situation that is unfair to all students, and one that is especially harmful to low-income students, students of color, and students who move from state to state.”

The Alliance’s common standards state profiles contain a great deal of information on how much progress each state has made in moving toward college- and career-ready standards, including information on when a state last revised its math and English language arts standards and whether a state is one of the thirty-one to align its high school graduation standards with college and career expectations.

Also included is information on whether a state is one of the forty-eight states whose governor and chief state school officer signed a Memorandum of Agreement to develop common core state standards in English language arts and math in June 2009. The profiles also reveal whether a state has plans to adopt the common core state standards, and, if so, note what entity in each state has formal adoption authority for standards.

In describing the need for common standards, the profiles analyze the gap between eighth-grade proficiency as measured by states’ tests and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Nationwide, the average gap between state- and NAEP-reported reading scores is 39 percentage points, although five states have gaps that are larger than 60 percentage points. The average gap in math is 30 percentage points, but four states have gaps that are larger than 50 percentage points.

The common standards state profiles include information on teachers’ attitudes on clearer academic standards, common standards across all states, and tougher academic standards based on a state-by-state survey released in 2010, as well as two- and four-year college graduation rates and unemployment rates by education levels.

The profiles also outline several ways states can benefit by adopting common standards and assessments. For example, states collectively spend \$1.3 billion annually to develop, publish,

administer, score, and report on tests. By working together to develop a common assessment, states can improve test quality and save money—a huge priority for states in today’s tight budget environments.

Common state standards would also ease the transition for students who move from state to state. According to the profile on Texas, about 93,300 school-aged children moved to Texas from another state in 2006 while more than 61,000 moved from Texas to another state. But the largest states are not the only ones affected; in North Carolina, more than 50,000 students moved into the state from another state in 2006 while nearly 40,000 moved out.

Common state standards and assessments that are aligned with college and career readiness will help to prepare students for success after high school; they will also help save states money that would normally be spent on college remediation. For example, if California’s high schools graduated all of their students ready for college, the state would save over \$687.9 million a year in community college remediation costs and lost earnings; Illinois would save \$210.2 million; and New York would save more than \$192 million.

“With expectations that are the same no matter where students live, all students—from Sarasota to Seattle—can be confident that they will have the skills necessary to succeed after high school and compete with their international peers,” said Wise.

Common standards state profiles for every state are available at http://www.all4ed.org/publication_material/commonstandardsstatecards.



POOR ECONOMY CONTINUES TO DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECT HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS: BLS Finds that Over 55 Percent of Recent High School Dropouts Are Unemployed

Between October 2008 and October 2009, the unemployment rate for recent high school dropouts was 55.1 percent, compared with 35.0 percent for recent high school graduates not enrolled in college, according to an April 27 news release from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).¹ It also finds that over 70 percent of 2009 high school graduates were enrolled in some form of postsecondary education, the highest mark since the study began in 1959.

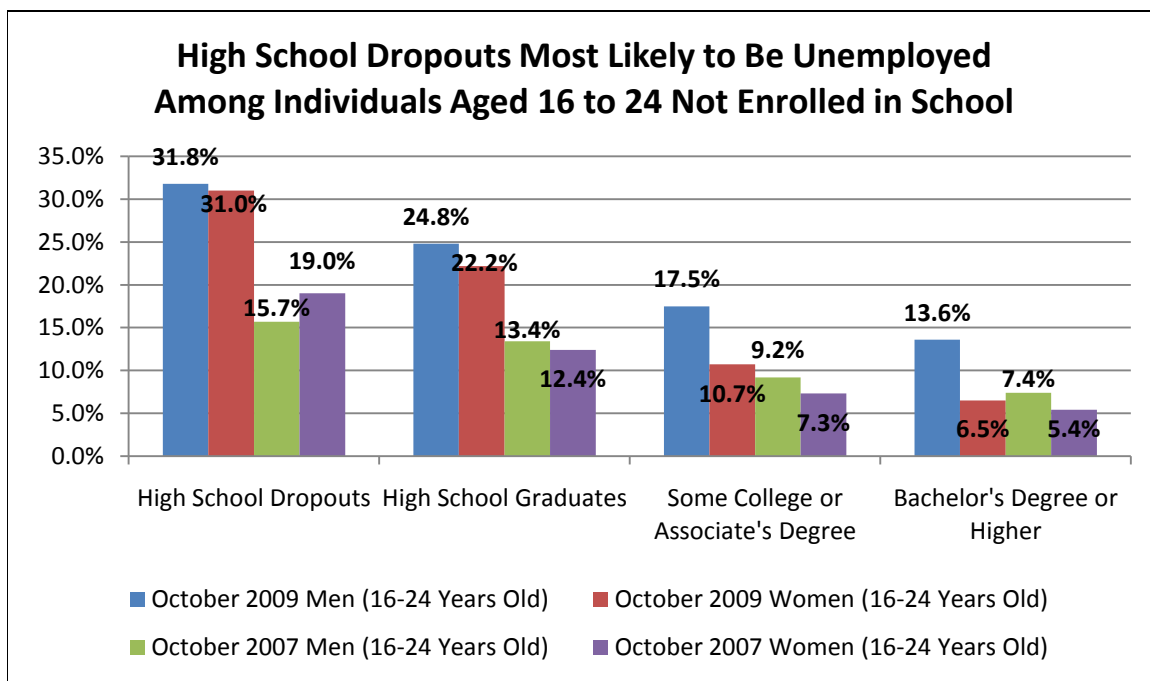
Of the 2.9 million students who graduated from high school between January 2009 through October 2009, 2.1 million (70.1 percent) were enrolled in college in October 2009. Among women, 73.8 percent were enrolled in college, compared to 66.0 percent for men. Asian students, at 92.2 percent, were the most likely to go on to college after high school graduation, followed by white graduates (69.2 percent), African American graduates (68.7 percent), and Hispanic graduates (59.3 percent).

The BLS also examined the labor force status of individuals aged sixteen to twenty-four who were not enrolled in high school or college. It found that the unemployment rate for this group of

¹ The BLS defines recent high school graduates as individuals who graduated from high school in January 2009 through October 2009. Recent high school dropouts are defined as persons who dropped out of school between October 2008 and October 2009.

individuals rose from 14.2 percent in October 2008 to 20.3 percent in October 2009. Among men, 23.0 percent were unemployed, compared to 16.8 percent for women. Among individual subgroups of students, African Americans, with an unemployment rate of 33.0 percent, were the most likely to be unemployed, followed by Hispanics (23.1 percent), Asians (20.0 percent), and whites (17.9 percent.)

The BLS also found that individuals aged sixteen to twenty-four with less education were more likely to be unemployed. It found a 31.8 percent unemployment rate for male high school dropouts, compared to a 13.6 unemployment rate for males with bachelor’s degrees or higher. As indicated in the chart below, the unemployment rate for individuals of all education levels has grown dramatically since October 2007, which was two months before the official start of the recession.



The April 27, 2010 BLS news release is available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgec.htm>.

The BLS news release with data from October 2007 is available at http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/hsgec_04252008.pdf.

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>.