



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



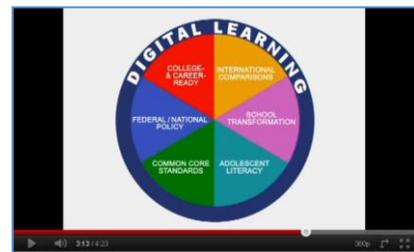
ALLIANCE FOR EXCELLENT EDUCATION ANNOUNCES NEW CENTER FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL DIGITAL LEARNING AND POLICY: Center's Work in Digital Learning to Be Integrated into All Alliance Policy Areas

Last month, the Alliance for Excellent Education announced the creation of the Center for Secondary School Digital Learning and Policy (the Center). The Center will focus on how digital learning can bring quality college- and career-ready education to secondary schools with a focus on improving outcomes for low-income students and low-performing schools.

“There are growing workforce demands due to a highly connected global economy, changing teacher demographics—including the looming retirement of many of the most experienced teachers—and state and local budgets that have been cut to the bone,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “It’s education’s ‘GM moment.’ There’s a demand for a better quality product, but no new resources to create it. Digital learning can help get us there. It’s not the only answer, but it’s a major part.”

The Center is housed in the Alliance’s offices and **Sara Hall, former deputy director at the State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA)**, is leading its work. In an effort to improve student learning, the Center’s work in digital learning will be integrated into all of the Alliance’s many policy areas, including school transformation, college- and career-ready standards, adolescent literacy, international comparisons, and other federal and national policies.

Specifically, the Center will identify promising practices, develop policy recommendations, and create advocacy tools to inform policymakers on how digital learning and technology can help make it possible for every child—especially students at risk and in low socioeconomic households—to graduate prepared for postsecondary learning and success in life.



To learn more about the Center, click on the video to the right.



PATH TO A STRONG FUTURE: Duncan Testifies Before Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on the U.S. Department of Education’s Budget

On July 27, just a few days before the nation was expected to run up against the debt limit, **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** testified before the Senate Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations Committee. Given the timing of the hearing, spending priorities were a popular topic among senators from both parties.

“I believe that to bring federal deficits under control, we must be willing to make some tough but necessary budgetary choices,” said **Subcommittee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA)**, who also chairs the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, which is responsible for rewriting the No Child Left Behind Act. “But we must be just as willing to say ‘no’ to foolish and destructive choices. And this is especially true when it comes to funding the education of our children.”

Harkin noted that funding for thirty-seven education programs was eliminated in Fiscal Year (FY) 2011, totaling more than \$900 million. He specifically expressed concern over the elimination of the “successful” Striving Readers initiative, the federal government’s only comprehensive literacy program.

Like Harkin, most senators from both parties underscored the importance of education, but some were more willing to ask the U.S. Department of Education to do its part to curb spending than others were. “I am gravely concerned that the Department of Education has delayed some of the tough choices that are necessary to ensure national economic stability,” said **Senator Richard Shelby, top Republican on the subcommittee**. “We all understand the critical role of education in our society and its impact on our nation’s ability to compete in a global economic environment. However, our nation is \$14 trillion in debt and, I think, we must rein in spending.”

During his testimony, Duncan outlined several priorities for the Obama administration, including protecting funding for Title I and special education while expanding reform programs such as the Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation programs. Duncan also stressed the importance of early learning and college-completion programs.

Duncan also used the opportunity to stress the importance of investing in education to secure the nation’s economic future:

Like America’s hard-working families, we understand that you can’t sacrifice the future to pay for the present, and nothing is more important to a family’s future and to our future as a nation than education. ... Our children are being cheated out of a world-class education because our generation is unable or unwilling to make the tough choices necessary to protect them. The current debate about the debt ceiling and the deficit is not just about budgets and numbers. It’s really about the fundamental promise at the heart of the middle-class American dream. ... Our children are counting on us to prepare them for the future. Business owners are counting on us to produce the workforce they need to compete in the new economy. Families are counting on us to open the doors to opportunity for every child, regardless of background, income, ability, or disability. We cannot let them down. ... The path to a strong future starts in our nation’s classrooms.

Video of the complete hearing is available at <http://1.usa.gov/ntaKAW>.



SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY: Alliance Report Offers Federal Recommendations on Digital Learning and Technology

Drawing upon promising educational practices already underway in several states, a new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education connects how federal efforts can enable states, districts, and schools to maximize technology and digital learning to improve student outcomes. To ensure that all students have access to this advanced educational environment, the report

recommends specific ways for the federal government to assist local and state educators to better utilize technology and digital learning to transform the American education system.

“America has only begun to scratch the surface of what is possible with technology and digital learning in the area of education,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, cochair of [Digital Learning Now! \(DLN\)](#), and former governor of West Virginia.**

“Now is the time for digital learning,” said **Jeb Bush, chairman of the Foundation for Excellence in Education, cochair of DLN, and former governor of Florida.** “Through technology, we can provide every student access to a high-quality education that is tailored to their learning pace, style, and interests. Yet, the U.S. education system currently operates as an eight-track tape in an iPod world. Students deserve better. The “[10 Elements of High-Quality Digital Learning](#)” is a roadmap to unleash the power of digital learning in education.”

According to the report, “Digital Learning and Technology: Federal Policy Recommendations to Seize the Opportunity—and Promising Practices That Inspire Them,” many districts and schools have already implemented programs that are changing student outcomes and the teaching and learning processes. Pointing to examples in Alabama, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Wyoming, the report shows how technology and digital learning are helping states and districts increase equity and access; improve teacher and administrator effectiveness and productivity; and boost student achievement and outcomes.

The report also notes that states and districts require dedicated support and leadership to build technological infrastructure, design policies, and use tools and resources that can transform teaching and learning for all students. Additionally, effective technology application will assist implementation of common core state standards—now adopted by forty-four states and the District of Columbia—as states and districts work together to develop new content, instructional strategies, assessments, and educator professional development.

“Given the many challenges currently facing the nation’s education system, our nation cannot afford to miss the opportunities that technology and digital learning offer,” Wise said. “Technology and digital learning can act as a ‘force multiplier’ to help states, districts, and schools ensure that all students can meet high standards and graduate prepared for college and a career in the midst of tough budgetary environments, increased global demands on student abilities, and growing teacher shortages in critical areas.”

The report highlights several opportunities where the federal government can support the implementation of effective digital learning. A top priority is major congressional action to enact a new Elementary and Secondary Education Act, currently known as No Child Left Behind, which the federal government can use to encourage states and districts to expand the roles of technology and digital learning to help all students meet higher academic expectations. Specifically, the report calls on the federal government to

- infuse technology throughout education programs;
- provide a dedicated technology program to ensure leadership and innovation;
- build on the recently released [National Education Technology Plan](#) and [National Broadband Plan](#) models and recommendations in new legislation;

- invest in ongoing research and innovation; and
- encourage states to implement the “[10 Elements of High-Quality Digital Learning](#),” released by DLN.

“Although education is primarily administered at the local and state levels, the federal government still has an important role to play in ensuring that all students can benefit from technology and digital learning,” said Wise. “The creation of policies that encourage and provide options for digital learning and technology—as well as the continued sharing of lessons learned and promising practices—are critical to significantly increasing learning for students in every state and school district.”

“Digital Learning and Technology” is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/DigitalLearning.pdf>.



NEW ALLIANCE BRIEF CALLS FOR ASSESSMENTS THAT MEASURE DEEPER LEARNING

New assessments that measure a broader range of knowledge and skills than typical assessments measure are vital to ensure that students learn what they need to succeed in the future, according to a new policy brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education. The brief argues that such assessments would indicate whether students understand challenging content and are able to apply that knowledge to think critically, solve problems, communicate their understanding, and work with their peers.

“All students need these deeper learning competencies in an increasingly complex society,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “New assessments are needed not only to show whether students are developing those abilities but also to foster deeper learning in the classroom.”

According to the brief, “Assessing Deeper Learning,” state tests used for accountability purposes exert a strong influence on classroom practice. Such assessments make the expectations for student learning concrete, and they signal to teachers the kinds of performances students need to demonstrate in order to meet standards. Two consortia of states are currently developing new assessments, scheduled to be in place in 2014–15, that will measure the state-initiated common core state standards in English language arts and mathematics.

The brief notes that other countries routinely employ assessments that ask students to demonstrate deeper learning abilities. These assessments are used to hold schools accountable for results as well as to inform instruction. In addition, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which compares student performance among fifteen-year-olds in sixty nations around the world, tests students’ abilities to apply their knowledge to real-world problems.

Technology can support a shift to assessments that measure deeper learning, the brief notes. Online assessments can employ simulations and other techniques that enable students to

demonstrate their knowledge to think critically and solve problems. Such assessments also provide results almost instantaneously, making them more useful to teachers.

The brief also notes that it is feasible to develop and administer assessments that measure deeper learning. Through the use of technology, and by pooling funds among states, states can lower the cost of high-quality assessments.

Federal policy can support the development and implementation of new assessments that measure deeper learning, the brief states. The federal government can require that assessments measure deeper learning competencies, support professional development for teachers, fairly measure the performance of students with disabilities and English language learners, and continue to provide support to states for ongoing operational costs of state assessments.

“Assessing Deeper Learning” is available online at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/AssessingDeeperLearning.pdf>.



MAPPING STATE PROFICIENCY STANDARDS ONTO THE NAEP SCALES: Most States’ Proficiency Marks Still Fall Below National Standards, Report Finds

The majority of U.S. states continue to have student proficiency benchmarks that fall well below national standards, according to a federal report released last month. Eight states increased the rigor of their passing marks on standardized exams between 2007 and 2009; however, when compared to the national exam, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the standards of these states and most others are still much lower than those at the federal level.

“Despite the progress, there is still much room for improvement in providing American students with a rigorous academic education that prepares them for success in the knowledge economy,” **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** said in a [statement](#).

Duncan expressed optimism that states will continue to increase the rigor of their standards and noted that forty-four states and the District of Columbia have adopted common standards in English language arts and math designed to prepare students for college and a career. “These standards will raise the bar so students are ready to compete in the global economy,” Duncan said.

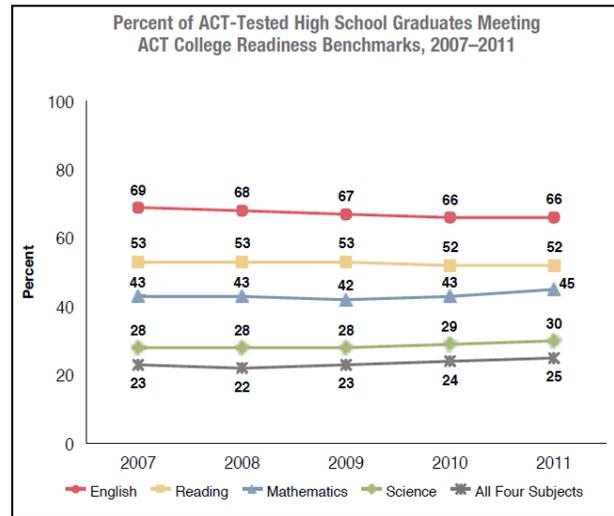
Because the No Child Left Behind Act allowed each state to develop its own assessments and set the levels at which students were considered proficient, there is great variation between the academic standards that students must meet. To better compare one state’s standards to another, while also tracking whether the rigor of a state’s standards have changed over time, the National Center for Education Statistics, an arm of the U.S. Department of Education, developed the report. First issued in 2003, the report, *Mapping State Proficiency Standards onto the NAEP Scales*, is released every two years and compares states’ measurements for student achievement on the NAEP’s 500-point scale.

As in previous years, the most recent report shows enormous discrepancy among the fifty states. For example, in eighth-grade mathematics, a 71-point difference exists between Massachusetts, which has the highest NAEP equivalent score, and Tennessee, which has the lowest. Further, in

Nearly two-thirds of high school graduates met ACT’s benchmark for college readiness in English, but students fared much worse on the other three subjects. In reading, 52 percent of students were considered college ready by ACT, compared to only 45 percent in math and 30 percent in science. Nearly 30 percent of graduates failed to meet any of the four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks.¹

As shown in the graph to the right, the percentages of students considered college ready in math and science increased slightly, while percentages remained the same in English and reading.

“It’s encouraging to see the positive trend continuing, with more high school graduates showing they are ready to succeed academically at the next level,” said **Jon Erickson, interim president of ACT’s education division**. “Although growth has been slow, it has been consistent. Things appear to be moving in the right direction.”



Contained in *The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2011*, the findings reveal improvements among Asian and white high school graduates since 2007, but no change in the average scores of Hispanic and African American students. The average scores of American Indian students declined during the same time period.

Although improvements have only been incremental, the number of students taking the ACT continues to grow. In 2011, more than 1.6 million high school graduates—49 percent of the entire U.S. graduating class—took the ACT, an all-time record number for the seventh year in a row. The proportion of African American and Hispanic test takers has grown from 19 percent in 2007 to a high of 26 percent in 2011.

The complete results are available at <http://bit.ly/o9IDwy>.

Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events in Washington, DC and around the country. The format makes information on federal education policy accessible to everyone from elected officials and policymakers to parents and community leaders. Contributors include Jason Amos, editor; Clara Hogan, writer; and Kate Bradley, copyeditor.

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>.

¹ ACT’s College Readiness Benchmarks are the minimum scores needed on the ACT subject-area tests to indicate a 50 percent chance of obtaining a “B” or higher or about a 75 percent chance of obtaining a “C” or higher in corresponding first-year credit-bearing college courses.