



StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



WAIVE AROUND: Obama Outlines Plan Allowing States to Waive Specific Provisions of No Child Left Behind Act

With the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—currently known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act—still under consideration in Congress, President Obama outlined a plan to provide states with flexibility from specific provisions of the law in exchange for state-led reform efforts to close achievement gaps, evaluate teachers and principals, promote rigorous accountability, and ensure that all students are on track to graduate ready for college and a career.



“I’ve urged Congress for a while now, let’s get a bipartisan effort, let’s fix [NCLB],” Obama said. “Congress hasn’t been able to do it. So I will. Our kids only get one shot at a decent education. They cannot afford to wait any longer. So, given that Congress cannot act, I am acting.” (Watch video of the president’s announcement by clicking on the image above).

During his [September 23 speech](#), Obama said the goals behind NCLB were “admirable” and praised the law’s focus on higher standards, accountability, and closing the achievement gap. At the same time, Obama said NCLB’s implementation had some “serious flaws,” such as forcing teachers to teach to tests, “squeezing out” history and science, and allowing states to lower their standards to prevent their schools from being labeled failures.

Under Obama’s plan, a state may request flexibility through waivers of several provisions of NCLB, including NCLB’s requirement that all students be proficient in math and reading by 2014. Other notable provisions that can be waived are NCLB’s school improvement requirements, including the required expenditures for public school choice and supplemental educational services, and the requirement of improvement plans for school districts that do not meet their targets for highly qualified teachers.

Obama was careful to note that the waiver plan would not lead to lower standards or allow states to escape accountability. “The way we’ve structured this, if states want more flexibility, they’re going to have to set higher standards, more honest standards, that prove they’re serious about meeting them,” he said.

In order to receive a waiver, states must implement reform efforts that address each of the following four key principles: college- and career-ready expectations for all students; state-developed systems of differentiated recognition, accountability, and support; effective instruction and leadership; and reduction of duplicative and burdensome reporting requirements.

In reaction to Obama’s waiver plan, [House Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline \(R-MN\)](#) [recognized](#) the urgency to reform the current law, but said the U.S. Department of Education should not be granted the “sweeping authority to bypass Congress.” Kline said that any initiative that “holds temporary measures above quality, lasting reforms will create more upheaval and uncertainty for states in the long run.”

[Senator Mike Enzi \(R-WY\), top Republican on the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee \(HELP\)](#), [called](#) Obama’s plan a “fundamental and dramatic shift in authority from Congress to the administration.” Enzi said the best way to address the issues Obama raises is through legislation and added that he was “extremely disappointed that after spending so many hours working toward a solution, we have reached a point where the president appears to preempt our efforts with waivers.”

[Senate HELP Committee Chairman Tom Harkin \(D-IA\)](#) [acknowledged](#) the obstacles preventing Congress from getting a reauthorized ESEA to the president’s desk and said he understands Obama’s decision to provide interim relief to states while Congress finishes its work. Harkin said waivers were the “best temporary solution available,” but stressed that new legislation is the best way to fix NCLB.

“The best way to fix problems in existing law is to pass a new one,” Harkin said. “I am concerned that waivers provide a patchwork approach rather than a national solution . . . It’s my strong preference that we pass legislation that provides a path forward for all 50 states, not just those who choose to pursue the waiver package.”

Alliance President Bob Wise called the waiver plan a step forward but agreed that the only real solution is for Congress to pass new legislation. In the video to the right, Wise compares Obama’s waiver plan to a punch in the boxing ring.



“The Executive Branch has chosen to move forward with waivers because Congress hasn’t acted,” Wise said. “So here’s the challenge: Congress, climb back in the ring, duke it out. Pass the legislation that truly leads to education reform and take away the need for waivers. When you do that, you score a knockout for our kids. There’s still time.” (Watch the complete video by clicking on the image above).

To learn more about how Obama’s waiver plan will affect the nation’s high schools, download the Alliance’s summary document “Obama ESEA Flexibility Policy: Highlights for High Schools” at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/ObamaESEAFlexibilityPolicy.pdf>.

Alliance Analyzes Benefits and Concerns in Obama’s Flexibility Plan for High Schools

An analysis by the Alliance for Excellent Education reveals several elements in the flexibility policy that could benefit the nation’s high schools while also highlighting some concerns for these schools.

Entitled “Obama ESEA Flexibility Policy: Highlights for High Schools,” the Alliance’s analysis finds the waiver plan will have a “more significant impact” on high schools because it will likely expand the number of high schools targeted for reform. For example, under current law, only high schools that receive Title I fall under the No Child Left Behind Act’s various accountability provisions and turnaround strategies. The new policy, however, will reach the thousands of high schools that are eligible for Title I funding but do not receive it.

Under the waiver plan, states must classify high schools with graduation rates below 60 percent as either “priority” or “focus” schools and implement appropriate reform efforts. Schools designated as priority schools must implement whole-school reform activities such as improving the school’s use of time and using data to inform instruction, while focus schools must implement state-determined improvement activities.

The analysis cautions that states have wide latitude in designating high schools with graduation rates below 60 percent as either priority or focus schools and says it is important to classify these high schools as priority schools to ensure that they implement rigorous reform. Additionally, it notes that states have the ability to develop their own improvement systems for the vast majority of low-performing schools and says the U.S. Department of Education should grant waivers only to states proposing accountability and improvement systems that call for rigorous reform of all low-performing schools based on their unique needs.

The analysis also notes that the waiver plan reinforces the work underway in states to implement college- and career-ready standards and aligned assessments. It says the policy will facilitate deeper learning for all students by specifically calling for higher-quality assessments that include the application of knowledge and skills.

“Obama ESEA Flexibility Policy: Highlights for High Schools” is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/ObamaESEAFlexibilityPolicy.pdf>.



BETTER LATE THAN NEVER: Congress Begins Work on FY 2012 Funding for U.S. Department of Education as New Fiscal Year Begins

Because Congress failed to pass any spending bills prior to the start of Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 on October 1, it was necessary to clear a short-term continuing resolution (CR) that will fund the government through October 4 and provide Congress with more time to negotiate a long-term solution. During the week of October 3, Congress is expected to clear another CR that will keep the government running through November 18.

In the meantime, the House and Senate Appropriations Committees finally began work on the appropriations bill that funds the U.S. Department of Education. On September 20, the Senate Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education Appropriations Subcommittee approved a bill that would provide \$45.47 billion, excluding Pell Grants, in discretionary funding for the U.S. Department of Education. That amount is about \$80 million more than what was approved for FY 2011, but \$3.36 billion less than the amount requested by President Obama in his FY 2012 budget. (Funding levels for all education programs as proposed by the Senate subcommittee and requested by President Obama in his FY 2012 budget are available at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget12/12action.pdf>).

Among the highlights of the bill is \$183 million for the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Program, funding that will help states implement statewide literacy programs that focus on students from birth through twelfth grade.

The bill would maintain funding for Title I at last year’s level of \$14.46 billion. It would also maintain funding for School Improvement Grants (SIG) and the High School Graduation Initiative at \$543.6 million and \$48.9 million, respectively. Race to the Top would receive \$698.6 million, the same as last year, but less than the \$900 million the president requested in his budget. It would maintain funding for Statewide Data Systems at \$42.2 million, which is less than the \$100 million the president requested in his budget.

In crafting the bill, which also funds the U.S. Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and related agencies, [Senate Labor, HHS, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Tom Harkin \(D-IA\) said](#) that budget constraints made the task “particularly difficult.” Still, Harkin said he believes that the bill “preserves this subcommittee’s top priority: every American deserves the right to a good education and job skills training; protection from illness and want; and an equal opportunity to reach one’s highest potential.”

On September 29, the House Appropriations Committee released a [draft of its version of the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill](#). The bill would reduce funding for the U.S. Department of Education by \$2.4 billion compared to last year’s levels and eliminates funding for more than thirty programs, including Race to the Top, SIG, and the High School Graduation Initiative. The bill would increase funding for Title I by \$1 billion and special education by \$1.2 billion.

With precious little time remaining between now and November 18, it is expected that legislators will be forced to roll many, if not all, of the twelve appropriations bills into an omnibus bill. So far, the House has passed six appropriations bills while the Senate has passed only one.



THE ROLE OF INDUCTION: Teachers Need Increased Support as Schools Aim to Graduate More Students College and Career Ready, New Alliance Policy Brief Finds

School systems must provide greater support and sustained mentoring for teachers, especially those new to the profession, in order for students to graduate ready for college and a career, according to a new policy brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education.

The brief comes as most states have opted to hold their students to higher performance targets by adopting the common core state standards to make sure they have the skills to be successful after high school. However, if teachers do not begin to receive high-level “induction,”— system support, professional development, and mentorship—the goals of the common core state standards will go unfulfilled, according to the policy brief “A System Approach to Building a World-Class Teaching Profession: The Role of Induction,” which was written with the support of Metlife Foundation.

“To achieve a fundamental transformation of education and help students meet the higher performance set by the common core state standards, the very culture of how teachers are supported must change,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Coherent incentives and structures must be created to

attract, develop, and retain the best teaching talent in high schools serving students with the greatest needs.”

To build a world-class teaching profession for the nation’s students, officials must develop strategies to reduce the rates in which teachers leave the profession and fix the unequal distribution of teaching talent between richer and poorer schools. The Alliance brief recommends the following solutions:

- Develop systems that encourage high-quality educator development and teaching grounded in teaching practice that has been proven effective.
- Design comprehensive programs for new teachers that provide coaching and guidance by well-trained mentors.
- Determine the performance indicators that can reliably assess teacher competency and provide feedback to support professional learning.
- Communicate core expectations for teaching practice, invest in professional development, and create organizational conditions conducive to meaningful staff collaboration and development.

Longstanding research reinforces that teaching quality outweighs even students’ social and economic backgrounds as the most powerful school-based factor in student learning. However, talented and well-prepared teacher distribution continues to be unequal among affluent schools compared to those serving low-income students and students of color. These groups of students are six times more likely than their white peers to attend a dropout factory,—one of more than 1,500 high schools where fewer than 60 percent of students graduate on time, according to research at Johns Hopkins University—which is much less likely to employ teachers who are certified in the subject they teach.

The policy brief notes that teachers in such high-need environments often lack opportunities for collaboration and feedback, and they report lower participation rates in mentoring and induction. Additionally, almost 15 percent of the American teaching workforce moves or leaves the profession each year and estimates range from 30 and 50 percent of all new teachers leaving after five years, with the greatest exodus occurring in urban areas. Recent studies suggest that the price tag for recruitment and replacement seriously underestimates the cumulative costs of the continuing erosion in the caliber and stability of the teacher workforce.

The brief highlights the work of the New Teacher Center, a nonprofit organization based in Santa Cruz, California, as an example of effective induction and mentoring programs for new teachers. The organization serves as a national resource and partners with schools, districts, and policymakers to help create valuable induction programs.

With an increased emphasis on holding students to the higher common core state standards comes a need to develop a set of policies and practices for schools and districts in terms of how they attract, prepare, support, and develop teachers.

To read the full brief, go to <http://www.all4ed.org/files/TeacherInduction.pdf>.

New Report Says Attrition Rate for New Teachers Could Be As High As 10 Percent

Nearly one in ten new teachers leaves the profession after just one year, according to new data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics. Out of 2,000 teachers tracked for the report *Beginning Teacher Attrition and Mobility*, nearly 10 percent of those who began teaching in 2007 or 2008 left in or after their first year.

According to the report, a first-year teacher assigned to a mentor has a greater chance of returning than one who was not assigned a mentor. The data shows that only 8 percent of those who had a mentor were not teaching in the following year, compared to 16 percent of teachers assigned a mentor who did not return.

Pay was also a factor in the study; however, only a slightly higher rate of teachers with salaries of \$40,000 or more were still in the profession the following year, as compared to teachers with lower salaries. Approximately 93 percent of beginning public school teachers who were earning less than \$40,000 in School Year (SY) 2008–09 remained teaching in SY 2009–10, and about 96 percent of beginning public school teachers who were earning \$40,000 or more in SY 2008–09 remained teaching in SY 2009–10.

This report looks at data from the first three waves of data collection of the Beginning Teacher Longitudinal Study (BTLS), which began in SY 2007–08. It tracks the career paths of beginning elementary and secondary public school teachers and its purpose is to provide a better understanding of the impact that different life events have on teachers' careers, such as getting married, moving to a new location, or starting a family. The study also examines how school and/or district characteristics and policies affect teacher satisfaction, and how teachers respond to transitions in their lives and careers, such as moving to a different school, changing grade levels or subjects taught, becoming a mentor, transitioning into a K–12 administration position, or exiting the teaching field. The BTLS is expected to continue for at least five more years.

The complete report is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011318.pdf>.



GLOBALLY CHALLENGED: Individual U.S. States' Proficiency Rates Vary Dramatically When Compared With Other Countries

A recently released report details how individual U.S. states compare to countries around the world in student math and reading proficiency. The data shows that scores vary widely; for example, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Vermont were some of the highest performers, mirroring advanced countries such as Korea and Finland. However, low-performing states including Mississippi and California scored at the other end of the spectrum with less-developed nations.

Sixty-five countries participated in the recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which ranks nations based on the percentage of students in the Class of 2011 who were at or above the proficient level in math and reading. Overall, the United States placed thirty-second in mathematics with 32 percent of students scoring at the proficient level, and seventeenth in reading with 31 percent reaching that level. With more than two-thirds of students failing to reach proficiency, education experts are increasingly concerned that America is not doing enough to prepare children to compete in a twenty-first-century global economy.

The August Harvard University report *Globally Challenged: Are U.S. Students Ready to Compete?* pits U.S. states against countries around the world by comparing PISA results to data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a federal exam administered by the U.S. Department of Education to students across the nation to measure achievement.

The study reports that 22 out of 31 countries “significantly” outperformed the United States in math. And a majority of students from six countries and major cities Shanghai and Hong Kong performed at the proficient level, compared to less than one-third of American students.

Massachusetts was the only U.S. state to have more than half (51 percent) of its students test proficient in math. The state with the next highest percentage to test proficient in math was Minnesota (43 percent); all other states fell far behind. Mississippi placed last with a rate of just 13.6 percent, a performance that is similar to countries such as Bulgaria, Uruguay, and Serbia. Other poor-performing states (20 percent or under) included New Mexico, Alabama, West Virginia, and Louisiana. Only 8 percent of students from the District of Columbia tested proficient in math, which closely resembles former Soviet Union territory Kazakhstan.

Overall, the United States fared better in reading and ranked seventeen out of thirty-one. Thirty-one percent of American students tested at or above the proficient level, compared to Korea, the top country in the world in this category, where 47 percent of its students tested at or above the proficient level.

In reading, Massachusetts was again the leader for the United States, with 43 percent of its students testing at or above proficient, followed by Vermont, New Jersey, and South Dakota. The District of Columbia and New Mexico were at the bottom of the list.

The data also shows a large disparity among racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Forty-two percent of white students were identified as proficient in math, compared to only 11 percent of African Americans and 15 percent of Hispanics. In reading, 40 percent of white students were proficient, compared to 5 percent of Hispanic students and 13 percent of African American students.

The report also notes the potential economic impact that an increase in student proficiency in math and reading could have on the United States. Increasing the United States’s percentages of proficiency to those of top-scoring countries around the world could likely increase the annual U.S. gross domestic product growth-per-capita rate significantly.

View a chart that ranks U.S. states compared with other countries and download the complete report at http://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/PEPG11-03_GloballyChallenged.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. 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>.