



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



“ENGINEERING SOLUTIONS TO THE NATIONAL CRISIS IN LITERACY”: Alliance Brief Calls for Alignment Between Literacy Plans and Common Core State Standards

Federal and state leaders have an important role to play in developing comprehensive K–12 literacy plans aligned to the English language arts common core state standards, according to a new policy brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education. The brief, “Engineering Solutions to the National Crisis in Literacy: How to Make Good on the Promise of the Common Core State Standards,” argues that developing these plans is critical to ensuring that all students develop the necessary competencies to graduate from high school ready for college and the modern workplace.

“The Common Core State Standards Initiative took lessons from high-performing countries in developing these standards and set forth clear and ambitious benchmarks in literacy,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “The standards are well designed to weave reading and writing skills throughout the fabric of other content areas such as history, social studies, and science.”

According to the brief, the adoption and implementation of the English language arts common core state standards establishes a “staircase” of increasing complexity in what students must be able to read and comprehend. The brief stresses that high school students’ ability to read and comprehend challenging text will predict their success in a postsecondary environment.

“Engineering Solutions to the National Crisis in Literacy” calls on state leaders to develop comprehensive, birth through grade twelve literacy plans that provide a systemic approach, equitable resources, and strong teacher training.

At the federal level, the Alliance brief urges policymakers to support the adoption of college- and career-readiness standards in English language arts and aligned assessments and to enhance the role of states in improving literacy instruction. It also calls on federal policymakers to support and invest in increasing the quality of teacher education and professional development and make investments in ongoing research and evaluation to build on the knowledge base about what literacy strategies can produce significant improvement in adolescents’ reading and writing performance.

The brief provides ample evidence on the extent of the literary crises. For example, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, American fifteen-year-olds currently rank fourteenth among developed nations in reading, lagging behind countries such as

Poland, Estonia, and Iceland. In addition, it notes that private industries spend an estimated \$3.1 billion annually to bolster literacy skills of entry-level workers.

The Common Core State Standards Initiative is 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 be informed by the highest benchmarks from across the country and around the globe, relevant to the real world, and reflect the skills and knowledge that students need for success in college and the modern workplace. Currently, forty-four states and Washington, DC have adopted the standards. (Learn more on the common core state standards at <http://www.all4ed.org/common-standards>.)

“Engineering Solutions to the National Crisis in Literacy” is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/EngineeringSolutionsLiteracy.pdf>.



ESEA BRIEFING BOOK: New Fordham Report Identifies Ten “Big Issues” in ESEA Reauthorization

A new report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute identifies ten big issues that it says must be resolved in order for Congress to finish a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as No Child Left Behind.

The report, dubbed the *ESEA Briefing Book*, notes that most observers “remain skeptical” that reauthorization will occur in 2011, but says it is “likely” that at least one chamber will produce a bill this year. The report divides the ten issues—shown in the box to the right—into four categories: standards and assessments, accountability, teacher quality, and flexibility and innovation.

The *ESEA Briefing Book* offers recommendations for each of the ten issues it identifies in an attempt to move federal education policy in the direction of “Reform Realism,” which the report defines as “a pro-school reform orientation leavened with realism about what the federal government can and cannot do well in K–12 education.”

Toward this end, the report recommends a new federal role in education that is “much more limited” and tailored to the federal government’s expertise and capacity.

1. **College and career readiness:** Should states be required to adopt academic standards tied to college and career readiness (such as the common core state standards)?
2. **Cut scores:** What requirements, if any, should be placed upon states with respect to achievement standards (i.e., “cut scores”)?
3. **Growth measures:** Should states be required to develop assessments that enable measures of individual student growth?
4. **Science and history:** Must states develop standards and assessments in additional subjects beyond English/language arts and math?
5. **School ratings:** Should Adequate Yearly Progress be maintained, revised, or scrapped?
6. **Interventions:** What requirements, if any, should be placed on states in terms of rewarding and sanctioning schools and turning around the lowest performers?
7. **Teacher effectiveness:** Should Congress regulate teacher credentials (as with the current “highly qualified teachers” mandate) and/or require the evaluation of teacher effectiveness?
8. **Comparability:** Should school districts be required to demonstrate comparability of services between Title I and non-title I schools, and if so, may they point to a uniform salary schedule in order to do so?
9. **Flexibility:** Should the new ESEA provide greater flexibility to states and school districts to deviate from the law’s requirements?
10. **Competitive grants:** Should reform-oriented competitive grant programs, including Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation (i3), be authorized in the new ESEA?

Specifically, it calls on the federal government to

- expect states to adopt rigorous standards and assessments and to maintain sophisticated data systems so that student achievement results and school-level finances are transparent to the public;
- eliminate Adequate Yearly Progress and allow states much greater leeway in how they rate their schools;
- allow states complete flexibility in deciding when and how to intervene in failing schools, determining the qualifications that teachers must meet, deciding whether to adopt teacher-evaluation systems, etc.; and
- turn reform-oriented formula grant programs into competitive ones whenever possible—with the exception of the main Title I program.

“To be clear, our vision for the federal role in education is a significant departure from No Child Left Behind,” the report notes. “It would mean a greater federal role in prescribing standards, tests, cut scores, and data systems, and much less federal say-so about sanctions, teacher quality, and everything else. It would mean greater transparency for student achievement and school spending and less accountability for raising test scores. It would mean more competitive programs and less formula funding. Still, it’s not so out of step with the Obama administration’s ‘Blueprint,’ and it’s certainly the direction that Republicans on Capitol Hill are heading.”

The complete report is available at <http://bit.ly/i7SBmM>.



EDUCATION FOR EMPLOYMENT: New Report Focuses on Educational Challenges in the Arab World, Finds Similarities to U.S., but Recommends Vastly Different Solutions

Over the last two months, the Alliance for Excellent Education has released [national](#), [state](#), and [metro area](#) data showing the economic impact of cutting the high school dropout rate in half in the United States. In mid-May, the Alliance will release new data showing the economic impact that students of color could have on national and state economies were they provided access to better educational opportunities.

The Alliance is not the only organization making the link between improved educational outcomes and economic gains and the United States is not the only country that could benefit by tapping the unrealized potential of its young people.

With almost one-quarter of our young people unemployed and losing hope every day, creating opportunity has never been so urgent. But right now, we are letting them down. We are letting them down in ill-equipped classrooms with untrained teachers; we are letting them down with outmoded curriculums already obsolete in the modern marketplace; we are letting them down when they seek our advice and practical measures; and we are letting them down when we fail to expose them, at an early age, to the entrepreneurial spirit and potential of the private sector.

Those words, which could have easily been President Obama describing the challenges facing so many American students, actually come from **Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan**.

Queen Rania's words appear in *Education for Employment: Realizing Arab Youth Potential*, a new report from the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and the Islamic Development Bank that calls for urgent action to tackle the unemployment challenges faced by young people of the Arab World.¹ Queen Rania is the honorary chair of the Education for Employment or e4e initiative.

While some countries such as [China](#) and the [United States](#) are growing older, the Arab World is comparatively younger. Whereas 20 percent of the population in the [United States](#) is under age fifteen and 21 percent is between fifteen and twenty nine, approximately one-third of the population in the Arab World is under the age of fifteen and another third is between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine.

As these young people come of age, they will add pressure to an already stressed labor market in the Arab World. According to the report, the Middle East suffers from the highest youth unemployment in the world at more than 25 percent; female youth unemployment is even higher at more than 30 percent. The report estimates that the economic loss of youth unemployment exceeds \$40–\$50 billion annually across the Arab World.

These low unemployment figures do not include people who are not looking for jobs. According to the report, the region's labor force participation rate, 35 percent, is among the lowest in the world and falls far below the global average of 52 percent.

Similar to the United States, part of the unemployment problem is due to a lack of qualified workers. The report finds that private employers in the Arab World say that two-thirds of new graduates are unprepared for the challenges of the workplace. As a result, more than half of employers must provide substantial training for their new hires. Students are also aware of this problem, with only one-third saying that their education prepares them for the job market.

According to the report, the region's employable population will grow dramatically over the next ten years. This growth, it argues, presents an "enormous window of opportunity for entrepreneurial energy, creativity, and economic activity." However, it also notes the potential for enormous risk. "High levels of unemployment create high levels of suffering and discontent," the report reads. "Letting unemployment rise to even higher levels is therefore not a viable option. However, creating the required number of jobs required will not be easy." The report finds that maintaining current unemployment rates will require the region to create an extra 35–40 million jobs.

Although the problems the region faces are similar to those faced in the United States, the report takes a different approach to solving them, perhaps due to the large role played by the IFC in

¹ For the purposes of the report, the Arab world includes the countries of Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, the West Bank and Gaza, and Yemen.

developing the report. The IFC is the largest global development institution focused on the private sector in developing countries. So whereas a report describing the educational challenges in the United States would likely focus on the role of federal, state, and local governments, *Education for Employment*'s main concern is “[unleashing] the full potential of the private sector.” Specifically, it explores how private stakeholders can contribute to meeting needs and identifies the “necessary conditions for success” that governments could set through regulatory policies and transparency to expand private sector involvement.

To learn more about the e4e initiative or to download the report, visit <http://e4earabyouth.com/>.



WINNING THE FUTURE: New White House Report Stresses Importance of Better Educational Outcomes for Latino Students to Nation's Future Success

The nation cannot achieve President Obama's goal of the United States having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 without strengthening and expanding educational opportunities for all Latino students, according to a new report from the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics. The report, *Winning the Future: Improving Education for the Latino Community*, projects that Latinos will account for 60 percent of the nation's population growth between 2005 and 2050.

According to the study, Latinos are by far the largest minority group in the U.S. public school system, comprising more than one-fifth of all pre-K–12 students. However, the report also finds that Latino students have the lowest educational attainment level of any group in the United States. Only about half of all Latino students earn their high school diploma on time and of the students who do complete high school, only half are as likely as their peers to be prepared for college. Only 13 percent of Latinos have a bachelor's degree and only 4 percent have completed graduate or professional degree programs, according to the study. In addition, Latino students have fewer opportunities than their peers to take challenging curricular including advanced courses in mathematics and Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate courses.

“Hispanic students have graduated at lower rates than the rest of the population for years, making America's progress impossible if they continue to lag behind,” said **Juan Sepulveda, director of White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics**. “Strengthening and improving educational excellence in this community isn't just a Hispanic problem. It's a challenge to the entire country.”

Winning the Future finds that that the educational disadvantage starts at a young age for Latino children and they are less likely than any other group to enroll in any early learning program. Through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the Obama administration has invested \$5 billion in early learning programs including Head Start, Early Head Start, and child care and services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). According to the study, 36 percent of the children served by Head Start are Latino and 19 percent of the nation's child care subsidy recipients are Latino.

The report highlights the federal Race to the Top Initiative, a competitive grant-based program designed to encourage states to implement systematic reforms.

“The 11 states and one district that have been selected as Race to the Top winners—Tennessee, Delaware, Rhode Island, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Ohio and the District of Columbia—reach approximately 22 percent of the Nation’s Latino student population,” the report notes. “Five of the 15 states with the largest Hispanic populations won, including Florida (3rd), New York (4th), Georgia (10th), North Carolina (11th) and Massachusetts (15th).”

To improve educational opportunities for all students and close achievement gaps, the report recommends higher standards for student learning, innovation that builds on what works in America’s classrooms, and effective teachers and school leaders. The study points out that although more than 22 percent of public school students are Latino nationwide, less than 7 percent of teachers are Latino. In addition, Latino males account for less than 2 percent of teachers nationwide. To that end, the White House launched the TEACH Campaign in September 2010 with the goal of increasing the number, quality, and diversity of teacher candidates.

To increase college graduation rates among Latinos, the report calls for strengthening Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI), which are public or private nonprofit colleges or universities with a study body that is at least 25 percent Latino. Although the 334 HSIs in the nation represent only 5 percent of all higher education institutions, they enrolled 51 percent of all Hispanics pursuing higher education degrees in America during the 2003–04 school year.

In late April, senior officials within the Obama administration met with dozens of educators and community leaders at Miami Dade College to release these report findings and to outline strategies to meet President Obama’s goal for the nation to have the best educated workforce in the world by 2020.

To read the full report visit <http://1.usa.gov/iS9x1V>.



PLUGGED IN: Report Offers Lessons Learned from a Latino-Serving, Workforce Development Program

A new report summarizes the successes and challenges of a Latino-serving, community-based, youth workforce development program and provides lessons learned. The initiative, Escalera Program: Taking Steps to Success, was developed by the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) in 2001 and is based on an afterschool model to promote economic mobility through educational attainment and career planning.

The report, *Plugged In: Positive Development Strategies for Disconnected Latino Youth*, examines many of the challenges facing Latino youth. It notes that only 58 percent of Latino youth graduate with a high school, diploma, compared to 78 percent of white students. Additionally, Latino youth were more likely than any other student subgroup to be out of school without a General Equivalency Diploma or high school diploma between the ages of 16 and 24. “Unique life circumstances such as language barriers and questionable immigration statuses are factors that play heavily in the ability of Latino youth to succeed at the rate of their

counterparts,” said **Delia Pompa, senior vice president of programs at NCLR**. “The support given to Hispanic youth through the Escalera program enables them to control their futures. They identify their strengths and build upon them.”

The report examines the results-to-date of the Escalera program, which is underway in three pilot locations including Austin (TX), Los Angeles (CA), and rural New Mexico. Escalera promotes economic mobility through educational attainment, career planning, and access to information about advanced careers. Its goal is to close the economic gap for Latinos by increasing the number of highly skilled and educated Latino youth and the ability of Hispanic community-based organizations to cultivate the talent pipeline. The report notes that this goal is especially important considering that Latinos are one of the fastest-growing segments of the U.S. population and are projected to make up one-third of the American workforce by 2050.

Plugged In finds that across the three sites, several core competencies are central to success, including reconnection, foundation skills, leadership and personal development, educational attainment, workforce readiness skills, and career exploration. Based on these observations, the report offers several recommendations for policymakers, funders, and program administrators serving the Latino population:

- Encourage collaboration and partnership among local communities and youth-serving programs and institutions through funding that rewards the development of a dropout recovery system that provides seamless wraparound services for most-at-risk populations.
- Ensure that funding for disconnected youth programs take into account the costs that community-based organizations incur for maintaining appropriate staff-to-youth ratios and training and developing skilled case managers, and the associated costs of providing high-quality case management services.
- Invest in the development and implementation of programs that offer services to disconnected youth for longer program cycles, and establish qualitative measures of success in addition to quantitative outcomes.
- Explore models that help families become partners, and include them in each step of participants’ progress to illustrate the merits of involvement and of supporting participants’ educational and professional endeavors.

To read the full report, visit <http://bit.ly/fk1Fy7>.

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; Emily Kingsland, 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>.