



# Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **CULTURE SHIFT: Preparing Students for Today's Demands Requires Shift to Learner-Centered Instruction Powered by Digital Learning, New Alliance Report Finds**

Preparing all students to succeed in today's increasingly complex world requires a shift from a teacher-centric culture to learner-centered instruction that recognizes students' individual learning needs, according to a new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education.

The report, *Culture Shift: Teaching in a Learner-Centered Environment Powered by Digital Learning*, examines the support that educators and schools will require to implement genuine teaching practices that are personalized for each student. Digital learning, the report argues, can be a major strategy for enabling teachers to meet varied students' needs while also supporting necessary cultural shifts in teaching.

"The global economy has raised the stakes for today's students," said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. "To help students meet these higher expectations and graduate college and career ready, the nation's education system must follow the examples of successful schools that provide a more personalized, rigorous, and collaborative learning environment that moves from teacher-directed, one-size-fits-all instructional strategies toward a learner-centered model."

According to the report, learner-centered instruction is personalized, rigorous, and based on college- and career-ready expectations. It is also collaborative, relevant, and flexible, with learning taking place anytime or anywhere. A true shift to a learner-centered environment powered by effective technology requires a strong school culture that embodies, encourages, and focuses on the needs of each student, the report argues. Specifically, *Culture Shift* maintains that the integration of technology and digital learning, school leadership, and changes in the teaching profession are critical to the transition to this new culture.

The report argues that technology allows educators to increase the use of data on a regular basis and to provide different students with learning experiences that take place at different paces, times, and locations. Students can access more content, courses, and collaborative opportunities while teachers have the opportunity to work with adaptive software, real-time results of assessments, and other evidence-based practices that support more effective and personalized instruction.

Moving to a learner-centered model will require teachers to take on new professional responsibilities and roles in working with students and peers, the report finds. For example, teachers could take on hybrid positions at a school in which they teach students and work in

other capacities, including that of a facilitator of learning; user of data and assessments; collaborator, contributor, and coach with peers; and curriculum adapter and designer. To be prepared for these new roles, teachers need support and professional learning opportunities to help them develop new skills that maximize the potential of digital learning and provide models and opportunities for improving practice.

*Culture Shift* acknowledges that providing effective professional learning opportunities presents a challenge for many districts and schools, but it argues that technology and digital learning can boost opportunities for quality professional learning by increasing flexibility in terms of time, providing access to more specialized courses, and enhancing exposure to peers and colleagues from around the world.

“While many schools and leaders clearly want to move in this direction, the education system faces many traditional challenges that hinder the development of strong cultures in schools,” Wise said. “However, through unified vision, effective application of technology and determination to develop a culture that supports a learner-centered environment, both teachers and students can reach their highest achievement levels.”

The report offers the following recommendations for education stakeholders, including state and district leaders, principals, teachers, and community and business leaders, seeking to transition schools to a learner-centered culture:

- Develop a deep understanding of what it means to have a learner-centered environment; identify the potential changes that must be made from the current instructional models; and create opportunities to discuss and observe learner-centered instruction among all parties involved in a student’s learning process.
- Provide school and district leaders with the professional learning opportunities needed to understand how to initiate and grow a strong learner-centered environment in a school.
- Empower school and district leaders to develop collaborative working environments for teachers that set high expectations and provide the support needed for educators and staff.
- Integrate technology and digital learning into the strategic planning and culture discussions within the school to maximize potential to support learner-centered environments, including the use of data and assessments, multiple types of digital content and curriculum, and collaborative opportunities for teachers and students.
- Elevate the profession of teaching by understanding the complexities of teaching very diverse students in a learner-centered environment; establish teacher effectiveness evaluations that support growth and take into account multiple variables; and align professional learning opportunities to evaluations.

Download the complete report at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/CultureShift.pdf>.



**DIPLOMAS COUNT: Gains in High School Graduation Rates for Latino and African American Students Boost National Graduation Rate to 73.4 Percent**

The national high school graduation rate increased for the second straight year, according to *Diplomas Count 2012*, the annual report from *Education Week* and the Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center. The report pegs the graduation rate at 73.4 percent, an increase of 1.7 percentage points compared to last year and the highest level of high school completion since the late 1970s. It credits the improvement in the national graduation rate to significant improvements in the graduation rates for Latino and African American students, whose graduation rates increased by 5.5 and 1.7 percentage points, respectively.

“It’s no exaggeration to say that the educational and economic future of the nation will hinge on our ability to better serve the nation’s large and growing Latino population, which faces unique challenges when it comes to success in high school and the transition to college and career,” said **Christopher B. Swanson, vice president of EPE**. “Given what’s at stake, it is heartening to see that graduation rates for Latinos are improving faster than for any other group of students.”

According to the report, which focuses on the Class of 2009, the most recent year for which data are available, the high school graduation rate for Latino students was 63.0 percent, compared to 57.6 percent for the Class of 2008. Even with the significant increase, the Latino graduation rate still trails that of Asian students (80.5 percent) and white students (78.8 percent), but it is higher than that of African American students (58.7 percent) and American Indian students (53.1 percent). The report also finds a significant gap between the graduation rates of female (76.4 percent) and male students (69.6 percent).

With the uptick in the national graduation rate, the report shows that approximately 90,000 fewer students dropped out of high school compared to the previous year. Still, it projects that 1.1 million students from the Class of 2012 will not graduate with a diploma. That amounts to 6,000 students per school day or one student every twenty-nine seconds.

Among individual states, high school graduation rates increased in three-quarters of the states from 2008 to 2009. And over the past decade, forty-four states improved their graduation rates, led by Alabama, Arizona, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, New Jersey, New York, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas, each of which increased their graduation rates by more than 10 percentage points. Still, the report finds that graduation rates vary dramatically across states, with 35 percentage points separating the highest-performing state (New Jersey) and the lowest-performing state (District of Columbia). The highest- and lowest-performing states are in the table below.

State	Graduation Rate	State	Graduation Rate
New Jersey	87.4%	District of Columbia	52.4%
North Dakota	85.0%	Nevada	59.2%
Wisconsin	83.8%	New Mexico	59.4%
Minnesota	82.6%	South Carolina	61.7%
Iowa and Pennsylvania	80.5%	Mississippi	62.2%

The report also tracks the graduation rates in the nation’s fifty largest school districts. At the top of that list were Montgomery County, Maryland (87.6 percent); Fairfax County, Virginia (85.5 percent); and Jefferson County, Colorado (85.5 percent). At the bottom were Detroit (42.4 percent); Los Angeles (45.8 percent); and Jefferson County, Kentucky (48.3 percent).

*Diplomas Count 2012* also includes a special analysis of Latino students, including the challenges they face and key takeaways from schools, districts, organizations, and communities that work closely with these students. According to the report, 12.1 million, or 22.4 percent, of the 54 million five- to seventeen-year-olds currently living in the United States are Hispanic. By 2020, one in four children enrolled in America’s K–12 public schools will be Latino.

“Because graduation rates for Latinos lag substantially behind the U.S. average, this group makes up a disproportionate number of the students who do not finish high school,” writes Swanson. “Of the 1.1 million members of the class of 2012 that we project will fail to graduate with a diploma, about 310,000 (or 27 percent) will be Latinos. Two states—California and Texas—will produce half the nation’s Latino dropouts.”

The report identifies twenty-five “epicenters” of the Hispanic high school graduation crisis that collectively produce 37 percent of the nation’s Latino dropouts. Los Angeles, with nearly 30,000 Hispanic dropouts is first, followed by New York with 16,000. It also spotlights thirty-eight school systems that are “exceeding expectations” by having a Latino graduation rate that is higher than would be expected based on ten characteristics, including district size and poverty rate. At the top of that list are three California school districts—Lompoc Unified, with a Latino graduation rate of 89 percent, Ceres Unified (85 percent), and Merced Union (82 percent). All three of these districts would be expected to have graduation rates around 66 percent.

“With such strong and growing numbers, the educational achievement of this diverse community of students—who increasingly live in states and communities where Latinos were virtually nonexistent even a decade ago—has implications for the national economy, local labor markets, and prospects for upward social mobility for millions of Hispanic Americans,” the report notes.

*Diplomas Count 2012* is available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2012/06/07/index.html>.



**RECENT HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES AND THE GREAT RECESSION: Only 27 Percent of Recent High School Graduates Have Full-Time Jobs, Report Finds**

Only 27 percent of recent high school graduates have full-time jobs, according to a new national survey of individuals who graduated from high school from 2006 to 2011 and are not attending college full time. The report also finds that 30 percent are completely unemployed while another 15 percent are employed part time but are looking for a full-time job. The report, *Left Out. Forgotten? Recent High School Graduates and the Great Recession*, was released by the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University on June 6.

“The vast majority of recent high school graduates who are not attending college have been left out of the workforce or even job training and frankly are struggling to survive,” said **Carl Van Horn, professor and director of the Heldrich Center and a coauthor of the study.**

“Typically, they are either unemployed entirely or working in part-time, temporary jobs that do not pay them enough to earn even a poverty-level income. To make matters worse, many jobs that do not require a college education are being snapped up by recent college graduates who are also struggling to get a toe-hold in a slow job market.”

According to the report, individuals who graduated from high school in the “pre-recession” years of 2006, 2007, and 2008 fare better than individuals who graduated in the “recession era” years of 2009, 2010, and 2011. As shown in the table to the right, 37 percent of the individuals who graduated from high school in the pre-recession years are employed full time, compared to only 16 percent who graduated in the recession era.

TABLE 1. WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING BEST DESCRIBES YOUR CURRENT JOB SITUATION?

Employment Status of High School Graduates	Total	White	Black/Hispanic	Pre-Recession 2006-2008	Recession Era 2009-2011
Unemployed and looking for work now	30%	32%	35%	23%	37%
Unemployed but not looking for work now	14%	11%	11%	12%	17%
Working part time, not looking for full-time work	8%	7%	7%	7%	9%
Working part time, looking for full-time work	15%	14%	13%	16%	13%
Employed full time	27%	30%	25%	37%	16%
Military	2%	3%	-	1%	3%
Self-employed	3%	2%	6%	3%	3%
Volunteer	1%	1%	2%	1%	2%
Total	100%	100%	99%	100%	100%

The annual earnings of those working full-time are barely enough to keep them out of poverty, the report finds. Specifically, 90 percent are paid hourly and receive a median wage of \$9.25 per hour, or \$2.00 above the federal minimum wage. When asked why they took their current job, half of high school graduates said “they just needed a job” or it was “the only job available.” Only 16 percent took their job because it was what they “wanted to do.”

The report notes that wages have declined for all groups of young graduates—high school and college alike—in the aftermath of the “Great Recession,” which began in late 2007 and ended in 2009. However, it finds that wages for young high school graduates have dropped twice as much as those for young college graduates.

“Not only do high school graduates earn less than college graduates, they also occupy less stable employment,” the report notes. “Most of these high school graduates’ jobs—75 percent—were reported as temporary positions. With this combination of temporary, low-wage work, it is likely that few of the recent high school graduates would have been able to earn an annual income of \$10,890 to exceed the official federal poverty level for a single household.”

The report also surveys recent high school graduates on their high school experience: 70 percent “liked” high school and more than half said they made mainly A or B grades in high school. When asked how well their high school education prepared them for the job market, 30 percent said “not very well” and 21 percent said “not well at all.” Only 8 percent said that they were “extremely well” prepared.

When asked what they would change about their high school experience, 28 percent said they should have been more careful about the courses they took as electives and 23 percent said they should have taken more classes directly related to preparing for a career. Interestingly, twice as many African Americans and Hispanics (43 percent) as whites (21 percent) said they should have been more careful in selecting electives.<sup>1</sup>

The report also reveals that most individuals (63 percent) planned to go to college when they entered high school but failed to do so; only 20 percent said they planned to end their education after high school. When asked why they did not go to college, 40 percent said they could not afford it, 30 percent said they needed to work, and 10 percent had children or family members they had to take care of.

When asked whether they would need additional education to have the successful career they want, 70 percent of recent high school graduates said they would. Unfortunately, only 38 percent said they “definitely” plan to attend college in the next five years; another 25 percent said they “probably will.” Among the 17 percent of individuals who “definitely” or “probably” will NOT go back to college, 34 percent said they cannot afford it and 37 percent said they need to work.

“The swath of American youth we are describing with this sample is enormous, on the order of 15 million people or more, who are largely invisible and whose status is little better than that of itinerant workers,” said **Cliff Zukin, professor of public policy and political science at Rutgers and a coauthor of the study**. “This will remain a large policy problem even as the economy begins to recover.”

The complete report, including data from the questionnaire, is available at <http://bit.ly/LJoW88>.

### **Unemployment Rate Continues to Rise for High School Dropouts, Fall for College Graduates**

The unemployment rate for high school dropouts rose from 12.5 percent to 13.0 percent in May 2012 based on the [latest numbers from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). Prospects were only slightly better for individuals with a high school diploma, for whom the unemployment rate rose from 7.9 percent to 8.1 percent. At the same time, the unemployment rate for college graduates decreased from 4.0 percent to 3.9 percent.

A [recent article on MSNBC](#) examines the trends in the job market and finds that individuals increasingly need some education beyond a high school diploma to land a job in today’s economy. Based on the May 2012 data, the article notes that the number of employed high school graduates actually fell slightly from 34 million in May 2011 to 33.9 million in May 2012. Meanwhile, the number of college graduates with jobs rose from 44.8 million to 46.4 million during the same time.

“In general, it’s long been the case that people with a college degree have an easier time finding a job, and make more money, than those who have just a high school degree,” the article reads. “But in the past year or so, as the job market has improved slowly and in fits and starts, the gap between education levels has become especially stark. That’s a trend that experts expect to continue as the job market increasingly comes to rely on more skilled workers and has fewer options for people with just a high school degree.”

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<sup>1</sup> The report could not break out African American and Hispanic respondents separately given their small number in the sample.





## ANOTHER WAVE OF WAIVERS: Obama Administration Approves Eight More States for NCLB Waivers

On May 29, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced that eight more states have been granted flexibility from key provisions of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in exchange for state-developed plans to prepare all students for college and a career, focus aid on the neediest students, and support effective teaching and leadership. Including this latest batch of eight states—Connecticut, Delaware, Louisiana, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Rhode Island—nineteen states have been granted waivers under NCLB. Eighteen additional applications are still under review.

“These eight additional states are getting more flexibility with federal funds and relief from NCLB’s one-size-fits-all federal mandates in order to develop locally-tailored solutions to meet their unique educational challenges,” Duncan said.

At a news conference in Hartford announcing the waivers, Duncan called Connecticut’s application one of the “strongest and most innovative.” According to the [Hartford Courant](#), Duncan mentioned several aspects of Connecticut’s recent education reforms, including improving access to early childhood education, turning around low-performing schools, and developing meaningful teacher evaluation. If Connecticut lawmakers had not passed these and other reforms, “I don’t think I would have been here,” the article quotes Duncan as saying.

Duncan also took the time to offer a critique of NCLB, saying that it was “very, very punitive” and led to a “dumbing down of standards and narrowing of the curriculum,” the article reports.

According to a [press release from the U.S. Department of Education](#), Duncan said that many of the new state-created accountability systems capture more students at risk, including low-income students, students with disabilities, and English language learners.

The eleven states previously granted waivers are Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Tennessee.

***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; 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>.