



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



HALFWAY POINT: Obama Administration Approves Seven More States for NCLB Waivers Bringing Total to Twenty-Six; Iowa First State to Be Turned Down

On June 29, the Obama administration approved five additional states' requests for flexibility from key provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). On July 6, two additional states received waivers. In exchange for this additional flexibility, the seven states—Arkansas, Missouri, South Dakota, Utah, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin—agreed to develop plans to prepare all students for college and a career, focus aid on the neediest students, and support effective teaching and leadership. Twenty-six states—including this latest batch of seven—have received waivers under ESEA. Eleven additional applications are still under review.

“It is a remarkable milestone that in only five months, more than half of the states in the country have adopted state-developed, next-generation education reforms to improve student learning and classroom instruction, while ensuring that resources are targeted to the students that need them most,” [said U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan](#). “A strong, bipartisan reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act remains the best path forward in education reform, but as twenty-six states have now demonstrated, our kids can’t wait any longer for Congress to act.”

While twenty-six states have received waivers, Iowa became the first state to have its request turned down. In a June 21 [letter to Iowa Department of Education Director Jason Glass](#), U.S. Department of Education Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education **Deb Delisle** wrote that the Iowa Department of Education lacked the authority to enforce the requirement that teachers and principals be evaluated by student outcomes, among other factors. As a result, Iowa’s request for flexibility was not approved “at this time,” Delisle wrote, leaving open the possibility that Iowa’s request could be approved down the road in conjunction with certain changes by the state legislature.

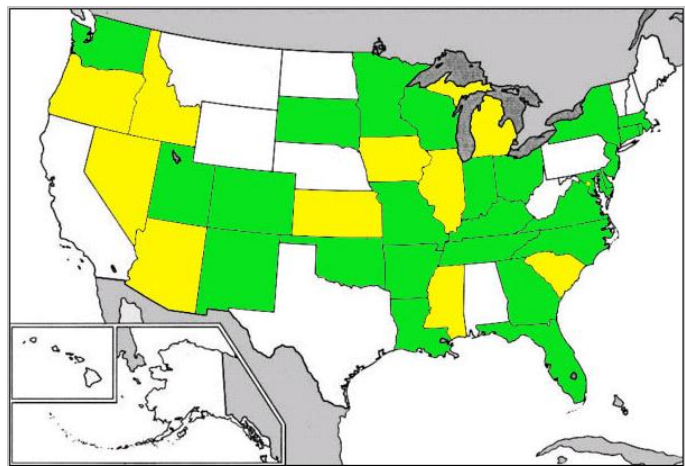
A [press release from the Iowa Department of Education](#) said the “central stumbling block” in the state’s waiver request is a new statutory requirement passed by Iowa’s state legislature that said any changes to the system of educator evaluation must be approved by the state’s legislature.

In the waiver request, Glass requested the statutory authority to “develop frameworks for teacher and principal evaluations that differentiate performance using three levels and reflect multiple, valid measures, including data on student growth,” the press release notes. Instead, the legislature passed a bill directing a task force to study the issues and make recommendations for the 2013 legislative session.

“This was a missed opportunity for Iowa’s schools to find relief from a law that holds them to unrealistic measures and then blames them for failure,” Glass said. “We made it clear to the legislature in committee meetings and in writing that the Iowa Department of Education needed statutory authority to move forward on implementing a waiver-compliant evaluation system. The legislature did not follow through.”

Although its waiver request was not granted, Iowa received approval for a one-year freeze of the target increases to which schools are held under NCLB. According to a [July 2 press release](#) from the Iowa Department of Education, the percentage of Iowa’s students required to be proficient varies by grade level and subject but is generally around 80 percent. Had Iowa’s request for a one-year target freeze been denied, the state would have been required to increase student math and reading proficiency levels by about 7 percent.

The twenty-six states that have been approved for waivers from key provisions under NCLB are shown in green on the map to the right. The ten states (including Iowa) and the District of Columbia with outstanding requests for waivers are shown in yellow. The fourteen states (plus Puerto Rico) yet to receive waivers are shown in white.



States have until September 6 to apply for the next round of waivers.

Alliance to Hold July 19 Webinar on Latest Happenings in Federal Education Policy

Much has occurred in federal education policy over the last few weeks. The Obama administration has approved twenty-six states for greater flexibility under the No Child Left Behind Act, released a plan to improve career and technical education, and announced its Race to the Top District competition. Additionally, the House and Senate Appropriations Committees have begun work on federal education spending bills.

Please join the Alliance on **Thursday, July 19 from 2:00 to 3:00 p.m. (ET)**, for a webinar featuring members of its federal advocacy team who will present updates on these developments in federal policy and their implications for states. The webinar will provide a high school perspective as it relates to the aforementioned policies; however, panelists have a variety of expertise and will answer questions from the audience related to other secondary school practices.

RSVP and ask questions of the panelists at <http://media.all4ed.org/registration-jul-19-2012>.



GROWING AWARENESS, GROWING SUPPORT: National Poll Findings Show Growing Support for Common Core State Standards and Assessments

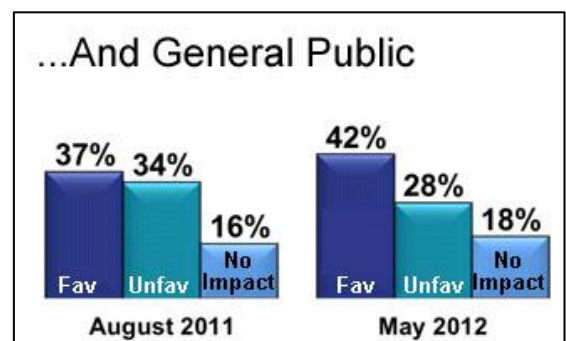
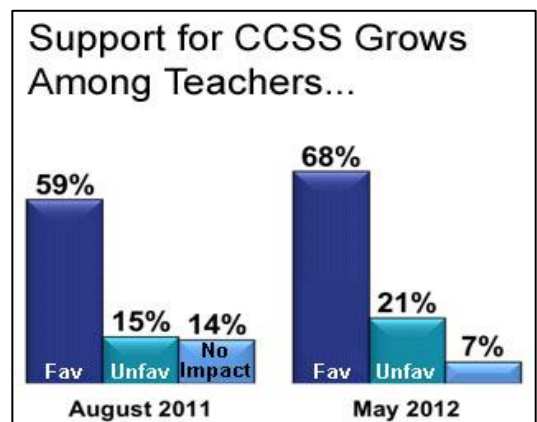
Sixty-eight percent of teachers—an increase of 9 percentage points since last summer—had a favorable impression of the common core state standards (CCSS), according to findings from a new national poll released by Achieve on June 29. As shown in the graph to the right, only 21 percent of the teachers had an unfavorable opinion of the CCSS, while 7 percent believed they would have no impact.

“The more teachers know about the common core state standards, the more supportive they are of implementing the standards, including new assessments,” said **Sandy Boyd, Achieve’s senior vice president of strategic initiatives**. “These findings demonstrate the importance of communicating with educators, especially as the task at hand moves from broad awareness of the standards to the deep understanding necessary for the CCSS to be taught in every classroom. Ongoing professional learning opportunities and support will be key.”

Adopted by forty-six states and the District of Columbia, the CCSS represent the first common expectations for what all students should know and be able to do in mathematics and English language arts at each grade level from kindergarten through twelfth grade in order to be prepared for college and a career.

Support for the CCSS is also growing among the general public, the poll findings show. Of those who have seen, read, or heard about the CCSS, 42 percent had a favorable opinion, an increase of 5 percentage points since last summer. During the same time frame, the percentage with an unfavorable opinion fell from 34 percent to 28 percent, as shown in the graph to the right.

Findings from the poll, *Growing Awareness, Growing Support: Teacher and Voter Understanding of the Common Core State Standards & Assessments*, show that teacher awareness of the CCSS has grown tremendously—from 68 percent to 87 percent—since last summer, with 87 percent saying that they have seen, read, or heard about the standards. The general public’s awareness, however, stayed largely the same, with 60 percent—the same as last summer—saying they had heard “nothing at all” about the CCSS.



When given a brief description of the CCSS, support grew among both groups, with 77 percent of the public and 72 percent of teachers favoring implementation of the new standards. “Voters support the implementation of the CCSS, but they too will need more information about the CCSS and what it means as the standards move from being an idea to a reality in schools,” said Boyd.

When broken out across the major subgroups, the poll’s findings indicate broad and deep support, as shown in the table to the right. Among political parties, 82 percent of democrats, 75 percent of republicans, and 75 percent of independents supported the standards. The poll’s findings also show support from 81 percent of African Americans, compared to 76 percent of whites.

The poll also tracked attitudes toward the new assessments being developed in conjunction with the new standards, finding significant majorities of both teachers and the general public in favor of implementing the new tests. Among teachers, 64 percent favored the tests, while only 28 percent opposed them. The general public was even more supportive: 74 percent supported the new tests, while only 17 percent opposed them.

When breaking down the results by various subgroups, the poll’s findings show strong support across all the major subgroups for common assessments. As shown in the table to the right, republicans, at 80 percent, were the biggest supporters of the new tests.

When asked to rate fourteen different characteristics of the assessments, the general public and teachers offered similar responses. Both groups selected “results will be available within one to two weeks” as their top choice and rated “tests would be the same across states” in their top four. Overall, findings from the poll show that voters are more supportive of the various elements of the CCSS assessments, as compared to teachers; the majority of voters rated ten or more of the fourteen characteristics as a “good idea,” compared to just one-third of teachers.

The poll’s findings are based on a national survey of 1,000 registered voters and 500 kindergarten-through-twelfth-grade teachers that was conducted from May 6 to May 10, 2012. The findings also reflect a series of eight focus groups—four among parents and four among teachers—that were conducted in November and December 2011 to explore perceptions of and reactions to information related to the CCSS and assessments.

The complete findings from the poll are available at <http://www.achieve.org/growingawarenessCCSS>.

Common Core State Standards

Voter Sub-Groups	Strongly Favor	Total Favor
Male	46%	74%
Female	44%	79%
18-44	44%	78%
45+	45%	75%
White	43%	76%
African American	45%	81%
Less Than College	46%	77%
College+	44%	76%
Republican	44%	75%
Independent	46%	75%
Democrat	45%	82%
Parents	46%	76%
Non-Parents	45%	77%
Urban	49%	76%
Suburb	47%	78%
Rural	36%	70%

Assessments

Voter Sub-Groups	Strongly Favor	Total Favor
Male	41%	75%
Female	39%	73%
18-44	36%	74%
45+	43%	73%
White	38%	75%
African American	43%	68%
Less Than College	43%	75%
College +	36%	72%
Republican	43%	80%
Independent	38%	69%
Democrat	42%	76%
Parents	40%	75%
Non-Parents	40%	74%
Urban	41%	74%
Suburb	41%	77%
Rural	34%	70%



BUILDING AND SUSTAINING TALENT: Improving Conditions for Teaching and Learning Key to Attracting and Retaining High-Quality Teachers in Hard-to-Staff Schools, Says New Education Trust Report

A new report from the Education Trust argues that efforts to improve the quality of individual teachers, such as building and implementing new systems for evaluating teachers, will do little to boost student achievement—especially for low-income students and students of color—unless states and districts also pay attention to the environments in which teachers work. The report, *Building and Sustaining Talent: Creating Conditions in High-Poverty Schools That Support Effective Teaching and Learning*, identifies school leadership and staff cohesion as two school factors that play significant roles in whether a teacher stays or leaves and profiles five districts around the country that have recognized the “power of school culture” in attracting, developing, and keeping strong teachers in high-need schools.¹

According to the report, thirty-two states have made changes to the performance evaluation systems they use for teachers and twenty-three of those require teacher evaluations to include objective evidence of student learning. It calls these policy changes a “welcome recognition” of the power of effective teachers and the damaging impact of ineffective teachers, but the report notes that these changes do not include school and district policy and culture changes, nor do they attempt to end the longstanding practice of assigning the weakest teachers to the students with the steepest learning challenges.

“Making evaluations more meaningful is a critical step toward improving our schools. But being able to determine who our strongest teachers and principals are doesn’t mean that struggling students will magically get more of them,” [said Sarah Almy, director of teacher quality at the Education Trust and coauthor of the report.](#) “We have to be intentional about creating the kinds of supportive working environments in our high-poverty and low-performing schools that will make them more attractive to our strongest teachers.”

The report acknowledges that there are many working conditions that matter to teachers and affect their levels of satisfaction and retention, but it finds that school leadership and staff cohesion “consistently emerge in research as especially important to teachers.” It argues that satisfaction with school leadership, “more than any other school factor,” impacts teachers’ overall job satisfaction and whether a teacher stays or leaves the profession. As evidence, the report points to studies of high-performing, high-poverty schools serving large concentrations of students of color finding that school leaders who “create a shared mission, focus on student achievement, and uphold a commitment to teacher learning can grow, attract, and retain effective teachers.”

Staff cohesion also matters to teachers, the report finds. “Similar to most professionals, teachers want to engage with their colleagues to share successes and challenges and to feel supported and motivated by a larger school community,” the report reads.

¹ The five school districts profiled in the report are Ascension Parish Public Schools (LA); Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (NC); Fresno Unified School District (CA); Boston Public Schools (MA); and Sacramento City Unified School District (CA).

School leadership and staff cohesion are especially meaningful to teachers in high-poverty schools. Citing data from the U.S. Department of Education’s 2007–08 Schools and Staffing Survey, a nationally representative teacher survey, the report finds that teachers in low-poverty schools who are unhappy with both leadership and staff cohesion are just as likely to stay as those who are happy. However, teachers in high-poverty schools who are dissatisfied with both conditions are less likely to stay than those who are satisfied. “Improved conditions in high-poverty schools shouldn’t translate into universal retention—not all teachers will be successful in these settings, but addressing these elements is especially important for high-poverty schools as part of their efforts to retain their strongest teachers,” the report notes.

Building and Sustaining Talent acknowledges that there is no “silver bullet” strategy for ensuring equitable access to effective teachers for low-income students, but it does offer steps that school districts and states can take to promote teaching environments that attract, sustain, and retain quality teachers in high-need schools.

The report offers various ways that districts can pursue this work, but it says that they must “first and foremost” use available data to understand the distribution of their teachers and make equitable access to top teachers an “absolute priority.” To make *all* schools places where good teachers *want* to work, the report suggests that districts do the following:

- Recruit talented school leaders to highest-need schools and get them to stay.
- Put in place teacher and school-leader evaluation systems that differentiate educator effectiveness in order to identify top-performing teachers and leaders.
- Provide teachers in the highest-need schools with meaningful professional growth and career ladders as well as opportunities to collaborate with other teachers.
- Avoid isolating the most effective teachers; instead, build teams of highly effective teachers in the most challenging schools.
- Recruit new school leaders and teachers to high-need schools and develop the skills and instructional abilities of existing employees.
- Implement a tool to measure teacher perceptions of their teaching environment and use data from it to identify target schools and determine primary issues that need addressing.
- Once better evaluations are in place, make working conditions data part of school and district-leader evaluations.

Noting that the difficult task of improving teaching environments primarily rests with districts, the report says that states must create a policy environment that removes barriers undermining this goal. Specifically, it identifies three policy barriers that often exacerbate inequities in teacher quality between high- and low-poverty schools: (1) staffing systems that rely solely on seniority; (2) arduous processes for dismissing poor-performing teachers; and (3) structures that prohibit building level autonomy over schedules and staffing assignments. The report says that states should also monitor data on equitable access to effective teachers between and within districts and require action when inequities exist, as well as hold innovative districts and schools up as examples of best practices.

“For too long, the high levels of staff dissatisfaction and turnover that characterize [the highest-poverty and lowest-performing] schools have been erroneously attributed to their students,” the

report concludes. “But research continues to demonstrate that students are not the problem. What matters most are the conditions for teaching and learning.”

The complete report is available at

http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/Building_and_Sustaining_Talent.pdf.

REPAIRING THE PIPELINE: Fewer Than Half of Low-Income Students and Students of Color in California Go to College, According to Education Trust–West Analysis

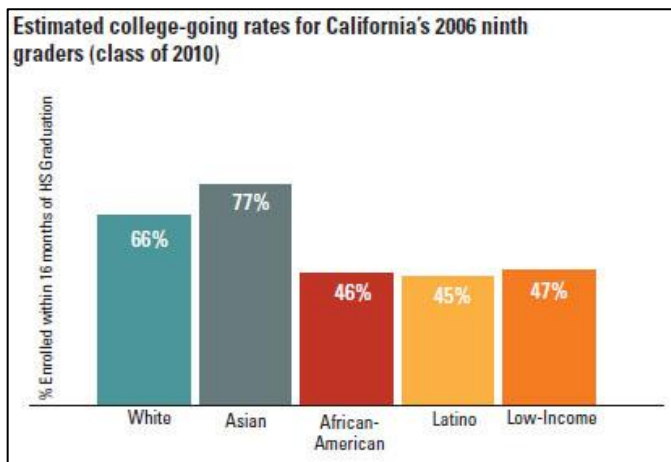
Fewer than half of African American, Latino, and low-income ninth graders from the Class of 2010 were expected to go to college, according to *Repairing the Pipeline: A Look at the Gaps in California’s High School to College Transition*, an analysis by the Education Trust–West. As shown in the graph to the right, the estimated college-going rates for these students were 20 to 30 percentage points below those of their white and Asian peers.

Based on new data from the California

Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), the analysis finds that only 27

percent of California high schools serving high

proportions of African American students and 10 percent of high schools serving high proportions of Latino students have high school graduation and college-going rates higher than the state average.



The analysis offers several recommendations for ensuring that more low-income students and students of color graduate from high school and go to college. For example, it suggests that high schools provide struggling students with additional education support and opportunities for credit recovery to decrease dropout rates. Additionally, it argues that high school graduation requirements should be aligned with state college entrance criteria. As evidence of this disconnect, the report notes that only one out of every six African American and Latino ninth graders in 2005 graduated in 2009 with the course work necessary to be eligible for entry into the University of California or California State University systems.

The complete analysis is available at

http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/Repairing%20the%20Pipeline_June%202012.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; 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>.