



# Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **FOUR MORE YEARS: Obama Wins Re-election, Plans to Continue Education Reforms Through Race to the Top, NCLB Waivers**

By defeating **former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney** on November 6, **President Barack Obama** earned a second four-year term in the White House. In the U.S. Congress, Democrats retained control of the Senate while Republicans kept their majority in the House of Representatives—a status-quo outcome that will force the two parties to work together to accomplish legislative goals.



In an [Election Night speech](#) from Chicago, Obama pledged to move the nation forward and signaled that education will continue to be a top priority for his administration.

“Despite all our differences, most of us share certain hopes for America’s future,” Obama said. “We want our kids to grow up in a country where they have access to the best schools and the best teachers—a country that lives up to its legacy as the global leader in technology and discovery and innovation, with all the good jobs and new businesses that follow. We want our children to live in an America that isn’t burdened by debt; that isn’t weakened by inequality; that isn’t threatened by the destructive power of a warming planet.”

Two weeks before capturing 50.5 percent of the popular vote and 332 of 438 possible electoral votes, Obama outlined how he would reach those goals when he released [The New Economic Patriotism: A Plan for Jobs & Middle-Class Security](#). The twenty-page booklet provides a summary of how he will use a second term as president to “strengthen middle-class security by making smart investments in education and training, growing small businesses, promoting technology and innovation, and reducing the deficit.”

On education, the plan does not offer many new initiatives, but it does indicate that Obama will stick to education reforms that are already underway, such as a new Race to the Top (RTT) competition for districts and greater flexibility under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) for states. It reiterates Obama’s goal for the United States to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 and his promise to recruit and prepare 100,000 new math and science teachers. The plan seeks to cut college tuition growth in half over the next ten years while continuing tax credits to help middle-class families afford college tuition, doubling the number of work-study jobs and creating incentives for schools to keep tuition down. Finally, the

plan includes training 2 million workers for “good jobs that actually exist” through partnerships between businesses and community colleges.

“A quality education is not a luxury,” the document reads. “It is an economic imperative for good-paying jobs, a strong middle class and a workforce that out-innovates the world.”

As he has shown with RTT and NCLB waivers, Obama does not necessarily need cooperation from Congress to reform the nation’s education system. To enact more systemic reform—say, through an NCLB rewrite—Obama will need to cobble together a bipartisan group of legislators from both the House and Senate. Integral to this group is **House Committee on Education and the Workforce Chairman John Kline (R-MN)**. In an [interview with \*Education Week\* reporter Alyson Klein](#), Kline said “the urgency in my mind is still there,” in regard to a possible reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, currently known as NCLB.

“We need to get legislation that will move us away from unilateral actions of the administration,” Kline said, referring to NCLB waivers. “States who have requested and even been granted these waivers are not happy with them.” Kline included his home state of Minnesota in that list of states unhappy with waivers, in part because of their temporary nature.

**Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA)** will also play a key role, as will **Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN)**, a former U.S. Secretary of Education who is expected to take over the top Republican spot on the HELP Committee in place of **Senator Mike Enzi (R-WY)**.



## **DISPELLING THE MYTH: Duncan Defends NCLB Waivers in First Post-Election Speech**

In his first post-Election Day remarks, **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** said, by re-electing Barack Obama as president, the American people affirmed that education is “not just an expense on a budget line that can be sacrificed in tough economic times,” but that it is “an investment in the future of our nation and our children—all of our children.” Duncan pivoted from the election to equity and achievement gaps and devoted the majority of his speech to defending the waivers that the U.S. Department of Education granted to states from certain aspects of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

“Contrary to what you may have read, these waivers will push states to dramatically accelerate achievement and attainment for disadvantaged students and students of color,” Duncan said during his November 8 speech at the Education Trust’s “Dispelling the Myth” awards ceremony.

Duncan said NCLB’s goal that 100 percent of students be proficient in 2014 was “laudable and lofty,” but “not credible.” Faced with meeting this “utopian goal,” Duncan said too many states took the “easy path,” by lowering standards to make it look like more students were proficient. On the flip side, too many schools that were successfully educating black, brown, and poor children, and were actually closing achievement gaps, were labeled as failures, Duncan said.

As an example, Duncan pointed to Kentucky where only about 20 percent of schools were accountable for the performance of African American students, even though 85 percent of Kentucky's schools enrolled African Americans. Under Kentucky's waiver, however, Duncan said 99 percent of schools will be accountable for the performance of these students.

"No one was more hurt by setting unrealistic goals and states gaming the system than disadvantaged students and students of color," Duncan said.

Duncan said the goals of the NCLB waivers are to "protect children, set a high bar, and provide as much flexibility as possible." He said getting the goals right was important, but not as important as the actual outcomes for children. "What matters most is results," Duncan said. "Whether kids are learning, and if achievement gaps are narrowing dramatically."

Duncan's complete speech is available at <http://1.usa.gov/SOcplg>.



### **BACK TO BUSINESS: Averting "Fiscal Cliff" Next Priority for Obama and Congressional Leaders**

With their re-elections secure, President Obama and leaders in the U.S. Congress quickly turned to the immediate business of preventing the so-called "fiscal cliff," the informal name given to the mix of automatic spending cuts and tax hikes that are scheduled to go into effect on January 2, 2013.

The spending cuts, officially known as "sequestration," will apply to military and domestic spending alike and would cut funding for the U.S. Department of Education by 8.2 percent or \$4.1 billion, according to a [report from the Office of Management and Budget \(OMB\)](#). Among individual programs, an 8.2 percent reduction in funding would mean a \$1.2 billion cut to Title I in Fiscal Year 2013, a \$973 million cut to special education, and a \$146 million cut to career and technical education.

While members of both parties have indicated a willingness to work together to prevent the fiscal cliff, it's unclear whether they can compromise on what role increased revenues, i.e. taxes, will play.

In his [November 10 weekly address](#), President Obama said he campaigned on a plan that would increase taxes on the top 2 percent of individuals—those making more than \$250,000 a year—and would not accept a plan that did not combine spending cuts with additional revenues.

"I refuse to accept any approach that isn't balanced," Obama said. "I will not ask students or seniors or middle-class families to pay down the entire deficit while people making over \$250,000 aren't asked to pay a dime more in taxes. This was a central question in the election. And on Tuesday, we found out that the majority of Americans agree with my approach—that includes Democrats, Independents, and Republicans."

Obama said the nation cannot “cut [its] way to prosperity,” and maintained that his approach would reduce the deficit while also allowing the nation to invest in education, job training, and manufacturing.

In his [weekly address](#), **House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH)** indicated that he would be willing to accept new revenues through the closing of special interest loopholes and tax deductions, but he said allowing the tax rate to rise on the top 2 percent would destroy jobs.

“Instead of raising tax rates on the American people and accepting the damage it will do to our economy, let’s start to actually solve the problem,” Boehner said. “Let’s focus on tax reform that closes special interest loopholes and lowers tax rates. Instead of accepting arbitrary cuts that will endanger our national defense, let’s get serious about shoring up the entitlement programs that are the primary drivers of our country’s massive, growing debt.”

On November 16, Obama will meet with Boehner and other congressional leaders at the White House to discuss how the fiscal cliff can be averted.



### **RAISING THE BAR: More Kentucky Students Prepared for College and a Career, According to New Tests Pegged to Common Core State Standards**

More than 47 percent of Kentucky’s public high school students were prepared for college and/or a career in School Year (SY) 2011–12, based on results released on November 2 from the state’s new tests, which are tied to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The percentage represents an increase of nine percentage points compared to the previous year. In 2010, Kentucky became the first state to adopt the CCSS in English language arts and mathematics.

“This increase, which translates to more than 4,500 students, is a direct result of Kentucky’s schools’ and districts’ focus on college and career readiness,” said **Kentucky Education Commissioner Terry Holliday**. “The overriding goal of the state’s public education system is to prepare students for the paths they want to take after high school, and these data show that we are making progress toward that goal.”

At the same time, the results show that the state has much work left to do to meet its lofty goals. Under Kentucky’s new model, public schools and school districts receive overall scores on a scale of 0 to 100. On average, state schools received a score of 55.2; elementary schools posted an average score of 57.3, compared to 53.5 for middle schools and 54.8 for high schools. Overall, scores for elementary schools range from a low of 28.0 to a high of 85.2; middle school scores ranged from 29.3 to 91.6; and high school scores spanned 27.9 to 87.3.

Although the percentage of students considered college or career ready increased, the percentages of students scoring “proficient” or better in reading and math dropped considerably. These drops were expected given that the new tests are much more rigorous than the old tests.

According to an analysis by [Education Week](#), 76 percent of elementary school students scored proficient or higher in reading on the old tests in SY 2010–11, compared to 48 percent under the new tests. In math, 73 percent were deemed proficient under the old test, compared to 40.4

percent under the new test. In middle school, reading proficiency levels dropped from 70 percent in SY 2010–11 to 46.8 percent in SY 2011–12; in math, they fell from 65 percent to 40.6 percent.

“We knew the scores were going to drop, but this is the right thing for our kids, our schools,” Holliday told *Education Week*.

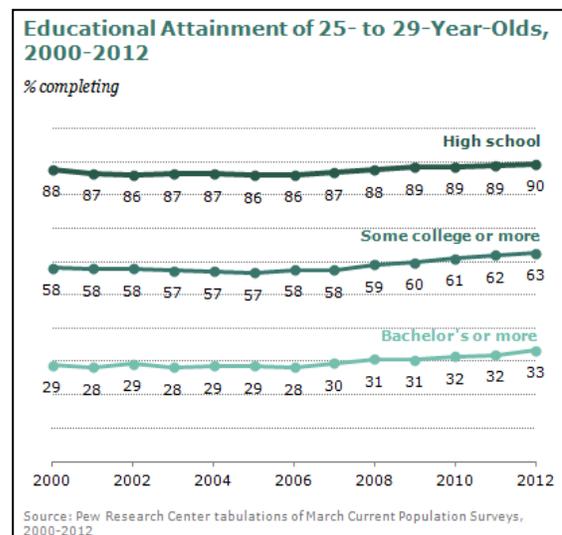
The press release from the Kentucky Department of Education announcing the test results is available at <http://education.ky.gov/comm/Documents/R077data.pdf>.



## TALKING ‘BOUT THE YOUNG FOLKS: Record Shares of Young Adults Have Finished Both High School and College

In 2012, a record 33 percent of the nation’s twenty-five- to twenty-nine-year-olds completed at least a bachelor’s degree, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of newly available data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Overall, 31 percent of the U.S. population over age twenty-five holds a bachelor’s degree or more, according to the report, *Record Shares of Young Adults Have Finished Both High School and College*.

As recently as 2006, only 28 percent of young people had obtained a bachelor’s degree. In 1971, the first year included in the report, only 17 percent earned a bachelor’s degree.



Similar records were posted in the percentages of twenty-five- to twenty-nine-year-olds with a high school diploma (90 percent)<sup>1</sup> and “some college or more” (63 percent), as shown in the graph above.

“These across-the-board increases have occurred despite dramatic immigration-driven changes in the racial and ethnic composition of college-age young adults, a trend that had led some experts to expect a decline in educational attainment,” the report notes. Instead, college completion has reached record high levels for African Americans (23 percent have at least a bachelor’s degree), whites (40 percent), and Hispanics (15 percent),<sup>2</sup> even as the nation’s college-age population is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse—today 44 percent of eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds are nonwhite, up from 17 percent in 1971, the report finds.

The report attributes the rise in educational attainment to the growing importance the American public places on a college education, as well as to the “Great Recession” that occurred from 2007

<sup>1</sup> The report includes individuals who obtained an equivalency degree, such as a General Education Development (GED) credential in its calculations.

<sup>2</sup> Sixty percent of Asians completed at least a bachelor’s degree, which is far above the other groups but below the record 61 percent that the group posted in 2004.

to 2009 and the sluggish job recovery since. “With young adults facing sharply diminished labor market opportunities, their rate of high school and college completion has been rising slowly but steadily since 2007, after having been stagnant during better economic times earlier in the decade,” the report notes.

According to the report, the educational attainment of today’s young adults is outpacing young adults from earlier generations—a finding that flies in the face of analysts who have argued for an “education reversal,” in which older Americans are more educated than younger Americans.

“To judge how well the U.S. education system is performing, it does not make sense to compare older Americans to younger Americans,” the report argues. “The basic problem is that the education levels of any particular age group change as they age. Trends in educational attainment are better gauged by comparing older Americans when they were the same age as younger Americans to today’s younger Americans.”

The report contains some bad news for the United States, however; it notes that other advanced economies are registering similar or even greater gains in college attainment than the United States. Additionally, college presidents and other experts are questioning whether the United States is losing its position as the global leader in higher education. According to a 2011 Pew Research Center survey of 1,000 college presidents nationwide, only 19 percent said the U.S. system of higher education is currently the best in the world.<sup>3</sup>

The complete report is available at

[http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2012/11/educ\\_attain\\_report\\_FNL.pdf](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2012/11/educ_attain_report_FNL.pdf).



***TEACHER ABSENCE AS A LEADING INDICATOR OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT: No Substitute for Teacher’s Presence in Classroom, Report Finds***

Schools that serve high percentages of African American and Latino students are more likely to have teacher absences, according to a new report from the Center for American Progress. The report, *Teacher Absence as a Leading Indicator of Student Achievement: New National Data Offer Opportunity to Examine Cost of Teacher Absence Relative to Learning Loss*, bases its findings on the U.S. Department of Education’s biennial Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) survey on teacher absences, released in early 2012.

Having analyzed 56,837 schools, the CRDC survey revealed that nationwide, 36 percent of teachers were absent more than ten days during School Year (SY) 2009–10; individual states range from a low of 21 percent in Utah to a high of 50 percent in Rhode Island.

According to the report, 5.3 percent of teachers nationally are absent on any given school day. But in New Jersey’s Camden City Public Schools—a district where \$22,000 per pupil is spent annually—up to 40 percent of teachers are absent on any given school day. After controlling for grade level and whether a school is a charter, the report finds that a school the 90th percentile

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<sup>3</sup> According to the 2011 report, 40 percent of presidents of highly selective colleges or universities say that the U.S. system of higher education is the best in the world, compared with 22 percent of heads of institutions of medium selectivity and 14 percent of heads of institutions of lower selectivity.

for African American students has a teacher absence rate that was 3.5 percentage points higher than a school in the 10th percentile. For Latino students, the difference is 3.2 percentage points.

While students of color are most negatively affected by teacher absences, charter school students are affected least. Traditional public schools experience teacher absences at a rate of 15.2 percentage points higher than those in charter schools.

One factor in this gap is state policy: states influence district and local leave policy for teachers. States can set a floor as low as seven days for paid teacher sick leave, but many states set the floor much higher, providing the means for teachers to take more sick time. The report believes that states with higher floors are far too “permissive” for teachers’ absences.

There are also gaps in percentages of teacher absences by grade level. Middle schools experienced the highest percentage of teacher absences with a national average of 37.8 percent, compared to 36.7 percent in elementary schools and 33.3 percent at the high school level.

The report notes that teachers have long been recognized as the most important determinant of student success. When they are absent from the classroom, learning slows. According to the report, every ten days a teacher is absent lowers average mathematics achievement equivalent to the difference between having a novice teacher and one with a bit more experience.

In addition to the academic cost, schools incur a large financial cost for teacher absenteeism. Although the report does not determine a comprehensive cost, it points out that stipends for substitute teachers and associated administrative costs alone amount to at least \$4 billion annually.

“The cost of teacher absence, both in financial and academic terms, can no longer be borne in silence,” the report reads.

What can be done to reduce teacher absenteeism? Some states and local districts are incentivizing teachers to take less paid leave through enhanced participation in pension plans and pay outs. Research finds that policies requiring teachers to phone-in to their principal to report being out reduces teacher absences, as well.

Read the full report at

<http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/TeacherAbsence-6.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; Cyndi Waite; and Kate Bradley.

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>.