



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



REAL PROGRESS: Duncan Touts Increases in High School Graduation and College Enrollment Rates While Defending Obama's Education Budget Before House Education and the Workforce Committee

During a May 21 hearing before the U.S. House Education and the Workforce Committee, **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** discussed President Obama's Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 budget request for the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and highlighted progress in student outcomes, including the highest high school graduation rate in three decades and increased college enrollments among students of color.

In his [opening statement](#), **House Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline (R-MN)** said the committee will "soon renew" its efforts to rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—currently known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)—and asked Duncan for the administration's leadership on the legislation. Kline set a goal of having a bill to the president for his signature "before the end of the 113th Congress," which is in January 2015.

Kline also discussed what he said was a "staggering" increase in President Obama's education budget combined with no real progress in education outcomes. He noted that the president's budget request for ED includes \$71 billion in discretionary funding and another \$25.8 billion in mandatory funding split between Pell Grants (\$7 billion), reforms to the teaching profession (\$17.5 billion), and a new universal preschool program (\$1.3 billion).

"Without question, the president's budget for the Department of Education has exploded over the last five years," Kline said. "The roughly \$60 billion spent by the department in 2009 seems almost reasonable by comparison. Yet despite the significant increase in education spending, we haven't seen any measurable improvements in student performance or graduation rates."

In his [testimony](#), Duncan rebutted Kline's claim that no measurable improvements have been made in education. "While the progress is not fast enough—we have a long way to go—the honest answer is there has been real progress," Duncan said. "High school graduation rates are at their highest level in over three decades, and for the first time in a long time we're actually on track to a 90 percent high school graduation rate by the year 2020."

Duncan also noted that the number of "dropout factories," or high schools that graduate less than 60 percent of their students, is on the decline, resulting in 700,000 fewer children attending these schools. "That's a big step in the right direction," Duncan said. "Those young people now have a much better chance of not just graduating but then going on to some form of higher education."

Duncan said the number of Pell Grant recipients has increased from 6 million in 2008 to 9.4 million in 2010—a more than 50 percent increase—and enrollment rates of students of color are also on the rise. Specifically, the percentage of Hispanic students attending college has increased from 22 percent in 2000 to 32 percent today; among African American students, 38 percent attend college today compared to 30 percent in 2000. “In a country that’s becoming majority-minority, this is the face of our country as we move forward. So real progress there,” Duncan said.

In his [opening statement](#), **U.S. Representative George Miller (D-CA), the committee’s highest-ranking Democrat**, noted several big transitions in education, including new academic standards and assessments, new accountability and school improvement systems, and teacher and principal evaluations. At the same time, however, Miller said he “fear[s]” that students and parents have “lost a federal partner,” creating an “uncertain environment” due to Congress’s inability to reauthorize ESEA and the threat of budget proposals that would “drastically” cut education funding.

“As reported just last week, the Department of Education is facing a nearly 20 percent reduction in funding on top of the cuts already made through sequestration,” Miller said. In contrast, Miller noted that the U.S. House of Representatives was prepared to pass military budgets “with improvements” so that the cuts fall on education. “For each of the past two years, Republicans have released budgets filled with giveaways to the wealthiest Americans at the expense of educating our nation’s children,” Miller said. “This year isn’t any different. In March, Republicans put forth a budget that not only keeps in place the across-the-board cuts known as sequestration but actually calls for even more draconian cuts in education programs across the country.”

While praising President Obama’s budget for “[recognizing] education as an investment and not an expense,” Miller also said he has “serious concerns” about ED’s decisions to grant waivers from certain requirements under NCLB and how states are implementing the waivers they have received. Specifically, Miller said some states were “lessening their focus” on the performance of certain groups of students, weakening the impact of performance targets, and moving away from graduating students with a regular diploma in a reasonable amount of time.

Miller also seemed to have a different opinion on whether the Congress could finish a rewrite of NCLB in accordance with Kline’s timetable. “I wish we did not need to discuss the waiver renewals,” Miller said. “I wish we were working in a bipartisan fashion to renew this law, the way we have done for many, many years over the history of the law. It’s the only way we could get a bill to the president’s desk and signed into law. Unfortunately, it doesn’t appear that we’re on that track.”

Kline shared Miller’s concerns with the waiver process but said he recognized the “importance of freeing states and school districts from the law’s outdated metrics and regulations.” The vehicle for granting that freedom, however, should be a “full reauthorization of the law, not executive fiat,” Kline stressed.

Significant portions of the hearing were devoted to congressional action designed to limit an increase in student loan interest rates and President Obama’s proposal to expand access to free, public preschool education for four-year-old children.

Video of the hearing is available at <http://edworkforce.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=333592>.

A DISTRICT TO WATCH: Cajon Valley Union School District Fosters Academic Growth, Student Leadership, Through Digital Learning

A new interactive video profile from the Alliance for Excellent Education shows how Cajon Valley Union School District (Cajon Valley USD) in California has paired digital learning with increased support for teachers and students to improve student outcomes, including significant improvement in student achievement, behavior, and engagement. The profile, *Cajon Valley Union School District: Changing the Culture of Learning to Empower Students*, is the second in a series of interactive video profiles demonstrating how leading school districts use digital learning to improve teaching and learning.



“Cajon Valley USD demonstrates to thousands of school district leaders a successful model in strategic planning and digital learning implementation. This groundbreaking interactive profile is an asset to the Alliance’s [Project 24](#), an initiative that helps school districts plan for twenty-first-century learning and teaching,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education**.

Cajon Valley USD is a small, urban, diverse K–8 school district serving 16,000 students in the greater San Diego metropolitan area. Just a few years ago, it was challenged by ethnic differences, poverty, inequity between schools, and low achievement. Today, academic achievement is on the rise—test scores on the California Standards Test increased by 24 percentage points in science and 13 percentage points in math; students are leaders of learning; and the district has received multiple awards and recognition for its efforts, including a 2011 Innovation in Education “Achieve” award from the local Classroom of the Future Foundation and an Apple Distinguished Program award in 2012 for its Enhancing Instruction Through Education program.

In addition to highlighting gains at the district level, the profile also focuses on dramatic improvements achieved by Cajon Valley Middle School (CVMS) where more than 80 percent of the student body is socioeconomically disadvantaged and the majority is non-white. As part of the district’s strategic plan for increasing student engagement and outcomes, CVMS approved a three-fold transformation initiative to improve both teaching and learning: (1) changing the

culture of the school; (2) emphasizing twenty-first-century skills and access to twenty-first-century technology twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week; and (3) shifting from students as consumers of content to students as creators of content. To complement the plan, CVMS received a new building and additional technology.

To change the school's culture, CVMS focused on developing positive character traits in its students. Teachers underwent extensive professional development and training to help students realize their potential while students received training in leadership. The school prioritizes one character trait every week; to promote this trait, students create digital content that is then broadcast daily in the school. Between school years 2009–10 and 2011–12, CVMS experienced a dramatic decline in behavior problems linked to these foundational lessons; suspension rates dropped by 11 percent and fights between students decreased from 300 to 3.

“When I came to the school three years ago, we set out with a goal to decide what we could be the best in the world at, and bringing technology into the hands of our students was one of those areas, but we found an even larger, more encompassing goal and that was to train student leaders to make a difference in our community,” said **Don Hohimer, CVMS principal**.

CVMS aspires to a 1:1 ratio of students to digital devices. Already well on its way to meeting this goal, students use handheld digital technology along with laptops to create their own content. To better meet the learning needs of all its students, the school prioritizes writing and creativity and uses a wide range of strategies, including mobile learning, an innovative creative writing program, increased use of data on student performance, and increased opportunities for students to create digital media.

“Cajon Valley Middle School is a school to watch,” Hohimer said. “We’ve got great kids, great teachers, and when you put those two together, we’re getting great results.”

The full Cajon Valley USD profile is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/CajonValley.pdf>.

In the coming weeks, the Alliance will release a case study on Dysart Unified School District (AZ)—the next in the Alliance’s series of interactive video profiles focused on school districts getting positive results using digital learning implementation. The Alliance’s previous interactive case study on Quakertown Community School District is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/Quakertown.pdf>.



WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN TO BE COLLEGE AND WORK READY: New NCEE Report Finds Community Colleges Have Low Expectations for Entering Students’ Reading and Math Skills

Students typically need only middle school–level math skills to succeed in community college math courses while the reading complexity of texts used in initial courses in community colleges falls somewhere between grades 11 and 12. And even though community college courses have low expectations for students, community college students often lack even these basic skills, preventing many of them from succeeding in community college. Those are the key findings from a new report from the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE). The report, *What Does It Really Mean to Be College and Work Ready: The English and Mathematics*

Required by First Year Community College Students, is based on a two-year study that examined the skills and knowledge in mathematics and English literacy that high school graduates need to succeed in the first year of community college.

“This report shows that our community colleges have shockingly low expectations of the students entering their institutions, because many—perhaps most—of our future nurses, EMTs, and auto mechanics haven’t mastered middle school mathematics and cannot read much of the material in their first-year college textbooks—even though they are only written at the 11th- and 12th-grade levels—and a large fraction of our future four-year college students have a very hard time writing a simple report that requires students to make an argument and support it with facts,” said **NCEE President Marc Tucker**. “If the United States does not fix this fast, its citizens will face a bleak economic future.”

The report focuses on community colleges because they educate 45 percent of U.S. college students and provide most of the vocational education in the United States, making them the “main gateway” to work requiring solid training but not a four-year degree. “It is clear that for a substantial majority of high school graduates, being ready to be successful in the first year of a typical community college program is tantamount to being ready for both college and work,” the report notes.

According to the report, students need to master middle school mathematics, especially arithmetic, ratios, proportions, expressions, and simple equations, to be successful in community college courses. Most community college first-year programs of study assume that students have not mastered Algebra I while the most advanced mathematics content used in the majority of first-year college programs is what the report calls “Algebra 1.25,” which consists of some of the topics usually associated with Algebra I, plus a few other topics mostly related to geometry or statistics.

Similarly, the report finds that the reading and writing requirements for students in initial credit-bearing courses in community colleges are “not very complex or cognitively demanding.” The report calls the requirements for writing “marginal at best” while the performance levels students are expected to meet in reading are “surprisingly modest.”

The report offers several recommendations that schools and community colleges can take to ensure that more high school graduates succeed in community colleges, including the following:

- Include Algebra II as a key course on just one of several mathematics paths to a high school diploma, eliminating the mandatory status it has in some states.
- Require most students to spend more time on middle school mathematics rather than rushing toward Algebra I.
- Reconceive community college placement tests to align them with mathematics skills that students actually need to succeed in their initial credit-bearing, programmatic courses.
- Increase writing assignments across all high school courses, especially those that require the presentation of a logical argument and evidence to support claims.
- Require high school students to read and understand texts of greater complexity.

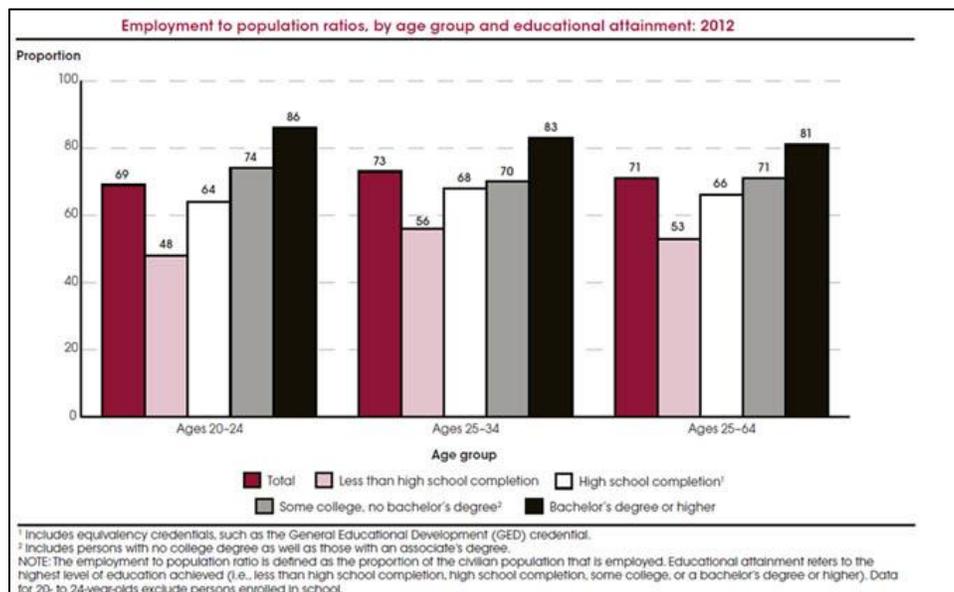
The complete report is available at <http://www.ncee.org/college-and-work-ready/>.



THE CONDITION OF EDUCATION 2013: Annual Report Spotlights Huge Gap in Employment Rates between High School Dropouts and Bachelor's Degree Recipients

Fewer than half of high school dropouts aged twenty to twenty-four were employed in 2012, compared to 64 percent of high school graduates and 86 percent of individuals with bachelor's degree or higher, according to *The Condition of Education 2013*, the annual report from the National Center for Education Statistics. Mandated by the U.S. Congress, *The Condition of Education* is released annually to help inform policymakers and the public about the progress of education in the United States.

As shown in the graph below, older high school dropouts—those aged twenty-five to thirty-four and those aged twenty-five to sixty-four—fared slightly better than their younger counterparts, but were still employed at a much lower rate than individuals with additional education. Bachelor's degree recipients aged twenty to twenty-four were employed at the highest rate of any age group (86 percent).¹

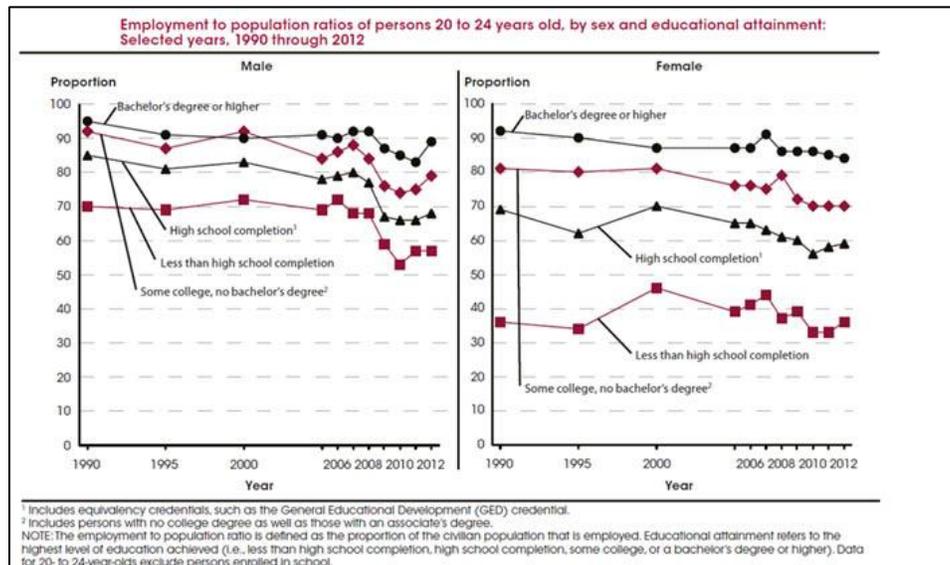


When broken down by sex, the employment rate for female high school dropouts aged twenty to twenty-four (36 percent) was much lower than it was for their male counterparts. The male-female gap in employment rates was highest among high school dropouts (21 percentage points) and declines as individuals attain more education. Among bachelor's degree recipients, for example, the male-female gap is only 5 percentage points (89 percent for males, 84 percent for females).

As shown in the graph below, the employment rate for both male and female high school dropouts aged twenty to twenty-four was much lower in 2012 than it was when the recession hit

¹ Unlike the unemployment rate, which does not include people who are not looking for a job, the employment rate treats all individuals—including retirees, stay-at-home parents, individuals not interested in working, and others—as potential workers.

in 2008.² Conversely, the employment rate for males with bachelor's degrees has nearly recovered to the level it was in 2008 while the employment rates for males with some college, with high school diplomas, and without high school diplomas continue to be far below their 2007 levels, indicating many of the jobs lost during the recession for individuals with lower levels of education have not come back.



Also of note, the 7-percentage-point decrease—from 92 to 85 percent—in the employment rate from 2008 to 2010 for males who had at least a bachelor's degree was much smaller than the 15-percentage-point decrease (from 68 to 53 percent) for males who did not complete high school, indicating that males with bachelor's degrees were less likely to be impacted by the recession than their counterparts who dropped out of high school.

The Condition of Education 2013 includes forty-two indicators of important developments and trends in U.S. education on population characteristics, participation in education, elementary and secondary education, and postsecondary education. In addition, each year's report includes special "spotlights" that provide a more in-depth look at the issues. In addition to trends in employment rates by educational attainment, this year's report focuses on kindergarten entry status, the status of rural education, and financing postsecondary education in the United States.

The complete report is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013037.pdf>.

Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress is a free 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 education 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 www.all4ed.org. Follow the Alliance on Twitter (www.twitter.com/all4ed), Facebook (www.facebook.com/all4ed), and the Alliance's "High School Soup" blog (www.all4ed.org/blog).

² The National Bureau of Economic Research determined that the most recent recession began in December 2007 and continued through June 2009.