



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



STRENGTHENING AMERICA'S SCHOOLS: Senate HELP Committee Passes Bill to Rewrite NCLB, House to Consider Its Version of Bill on June 19

On June 12, the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) passed a bill to rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which is currently known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The bill, named the Strengthening America's Schools Act of 2013 (SASA), passed on party lines with all twelve Democrats on the committee voting in favor of the bill and all ten Republicans voting against.¹



“I am pleased that the HELP Committee has passed this critical bill to replace the failed tenets of NCLB and give states the flexibility to institute their own college- and career-ready standards, performance targets, academic assessments, and accountability models that will improve our schools,” [said Senate HELP Committee Chairman Tom Harkin \(D-IA\).](#)

Harkin's [press release](#) on SASA's passage credits NCLB for providing important information about student performance and accountability but says it “unintentionally led to lower standards, a narrowing of curriculum, and a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to school improvement.” It also states that SASA would “provide states and districts with the certainty, support, and freedom they need to prepare all children for success in the twenty-first century” and highlights four broad themes: (1) focus greater attention on children in their early years to ensure they come to school ready to learn; (2) Encourage equity through greater transparency and fair distribution of resources; (3) sustain current state reform efforts and provide states with the flexibility they need to improve their schools; and (4) support great teachers and principals and ensure that all children receive the best instruction.

Writing for the Alliance's [“High School Soup” blog](#), **Jessica Cardichon, the Alliance's director of federal advocacy**, identifies a number of provisions in the bill targeted at the nation's high schools, including one that would make more of the nation's lowest-performing high schools eligible for increased funding, attention, and intervention. She notes that U.S. high schools currently serve 22 percent of students from low-income families yet receive only 10 percent of Title I funding. Additional provisions geared toward high schools would

¹ U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) caucuses with the Democratic Party.

- target intervention to the lowest-achieving 5 percent of secondary schools and any public high school with a graduation rate less than 60 percent;
- identify for intervention any public high school that is within the 10 percent of schools with the greatest graduation rate gaps among subgroups as compared to the statewide average;
- use an accurate definition—the four-year adjusted cohort rate—to determine high school graduation rates and preclude the use of other less accurate rates;
- ensure all students are prepared for college and a career by equipping them with “deeper learning” skills, such as the ability to apply rigorous academic content to real-world situations, think critically, and solve complex problems;
- revise the Pathways to College initiative to better align with President Obama’s Fiscal Year 2014 budget request for a High School Redesign program, which emphasizes the importance of rigorous academic content, applied and work-based learning opportunities, partnerships, and wraparound supports, all of which reflect the Linked Learning approach being implemented in a number of California school districts; and
- create a new pilot program that permits states, or a consortia of states, to incorporate “competency-based learning”—which advances students after they master course content—into their statewide accountability system.

Other provisions would use more accurate and standardized measures of poverty at the secondary school level; increase the focus on improving school climate and providing wraparound support; and expand standards and assessments to support instructional practices.

The next step in the process is bringing SASA to the Senate floor, something that could happen as soon as July. If last week’s markup is any indication, however, Harkin could face difficulty finding the Republican support necessary for the bill to pass the full Senate. As mentioned earlier, no Republicans on the HELP Committee voted for the bill—a significant difference from [October 2011](#), when the previous bill to rewrite ESEA received support from **Republican Senators Mike Enzi (R-WY), Lamar Alexander (R-TN), and Mark Kirk (R-IL)**.

In a [statement](#) issued after last week’s markup, Alexander, who now serves as the committee’s top Republican, charged that the SASA would “establish a national school board.” Alexander favored an approach that would significantly limit the federal government’s involvement, instead providing more state and local control while limiting the secretary of education’s waiver authority and consolidating sixty-two programs authorized in NCLB into two block grants, among other provisions.

Education Week’s “Politics K–12” blog has a helpful [side-by-side comparison](#) of Harkin’s and Alexander’s respective approaches. It also includes the approach favored by **House Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline (R-MN)**, whose committee will mark up his version of a bill to rewrite ESEA, called the Student Success Act, on June 19 at 9:00 am (EDT). Live video of that markup will be available at <http://edworkforce.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=338930>.

Video of the Senate markup and the text of amendments considered are available at <http://www.help.senate.gov/hearings/hearing/?id=9df7d755-5056-a032-524b-f74853bd2a26>.



GETTING “ConnectED”: Obama Plan Would Provide 99 Percent of Students with High-Speed Internet Within Five Years

In a June 6 speech at Mooresville Middle School in Mooresville, North Carolina, President Obama announced “ConnectED,” a plan to provide 99 percent of the nation’s students with next-generation broadband and high-speed wireless in schools and libraries within five years. The plan would also ensure that every educator in America receives support and training to use technology to help improve



student outcomes. To meet his goal, the president is calling on the Federal Communications Commission to modernize and leverage its existing e-Rate program for school connectivity in order to make a major capital investment in high-speed internet connections and employ them for connected classrooms. (Click on the image above to watch video of the president’s speech.)

“In an age when the world’s information is a just click away, it demands that we bring our schools and libraries into the twenty-first century,” Obama said. “We can’t be stuck in the nineteenth century when we’re living in a twenty-first-century economy.”

Obama said that only about 20 percent of U.S. students have access to true high-speed internet in their classrooms, far below countries like South Korea where 100 percent of students have high-speed internet. “In a country where we expect free Wi-Fi with our coffee, why shouldn’t we have it in our schools?” Obama asked.

The Mooresville Graded School District was an excellent choice for Obama’s announcement because the district implemented a digital conversion initiative in 2007, which included the deployment of an internet-accessible device for every student and teacher and a greater focus on changes in teaching and learning.

As noted in a June 2012 Alliance report, [*The Digital Learning Imperative: How Technology and Teaching Meet Today’s Education Challenges*](#), Mooresville’s teachers and administrators participated in extensive, ongoing, and job-embedded professional development as part of the digital conversion. It taught them how to maximize the potential of the technology to personalize learning, including digital content and resources through which students can become creators of knowledge and products. Mooresville also moved to digital assessments that provide timely feedback to ensure the availability of data for planning and decisionmaking.

“If a student is falling behind, a teacher is seeing it in real time,” Obama said. “It gives teachers the ability to see in real time what students need help, who is falling behind, and then offer extra help. If you’ve already mastered a lesson, you can move on to the next one. So as one teacher

said, ‘The thing I’m most proud of is not the technology, it’s the relationships I can build with the students that I teach.’”

Thanks to these changes, Mooresville is now ranked third out of 115 school districts in North Carolina in student achievement based on state test scores, representing a dramatic jump from the bottom quarter of all districts just a few years ago. The district’s high school graduation rate increased 25 percent in five years and is now the third-highest in North Carolina. Mooresville accomplished this with one of the lowest per-pupil expenditures in the state, ranking ninety-ninth out of the 115 districts.

“In today’s ultra-fast, super-competitive global economy, all students and teachers need to be up to speed and connected to the information superhighway,” [said Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia](#). “Currently, however, far too many are stuck in proverbial traffic jams or idling at on-ramps because they lack access to high-speed internet connections.

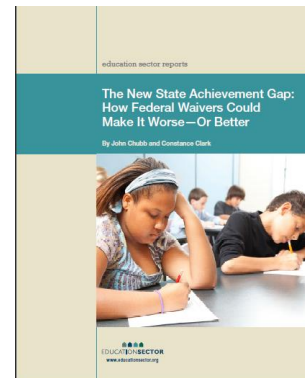
“With this announcement, President Obama is making it possible for every school to build on the ‘Mooresville momentum’ and ensuring that all students are on the same track, moving at the fastest possible speed, and heading toward higher standards and better learning outcomes,” said Wise.

More information on the president’s ConnectED plan is available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/connected_fact_sheet.pdf.



THE NEW STATE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: New Education Sector Report Examines How NCLB Waivers Could Impact Student Achievement

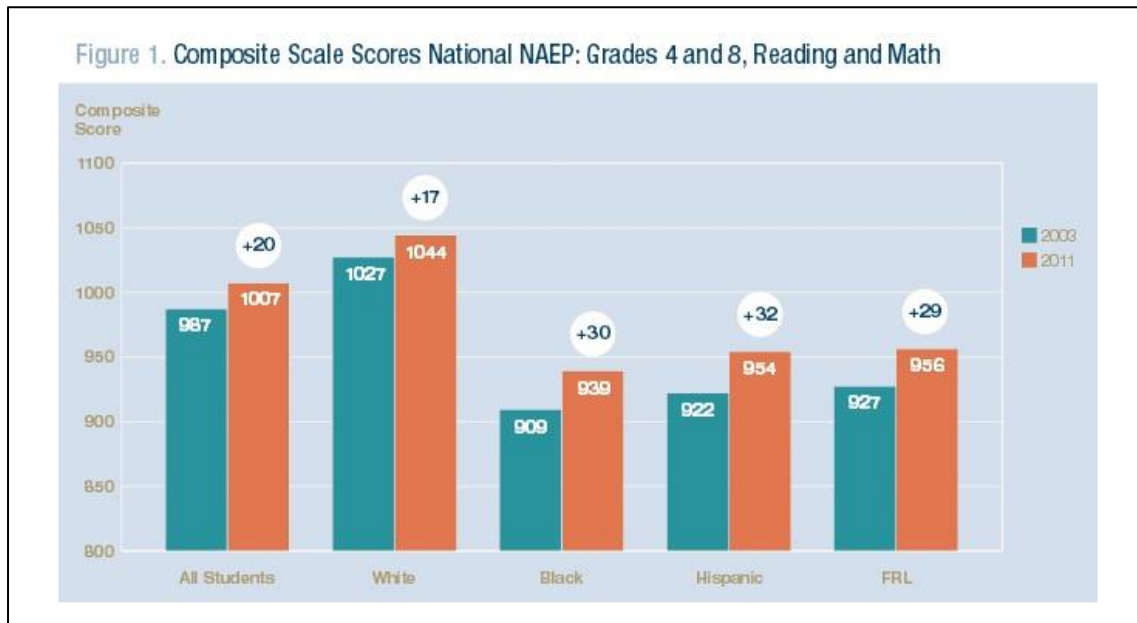
The federal government has a unique opportunity to study what state measures translate into student achievement gains through the issuance and implementation of waivers from No Child Left Behind (NCLB), finds a recent Education Sector report. The report, *The New State Achievement Gap: How Federal Waivers Could Make It Worse—Or Better*, looks at the achievement gap among the states—what it calls the “new state achievement gap”—and finds that, in just eight years, the states have created an achievement gap that is about 60 percent of the magnitude of the racial achievement gap, which took two centuries to establish.



“The new state achievement gap, though disturbing to behold, provides encouragement,” the report notes. “It shows that some states are reforming their education systems substantially. It shows that education policy can promote student achievement for large numbers of schools, and that gains are not all about economic circumstance.”

Though NCLB has drawn multitudes of critics, the law—the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—has led to gains in student achievement, the report notes. The report condenses data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as “the nation’s report card,” for reading and math scores in grades four and eight. As shown in the graph below, which is taken from the Education Sector report, student

achievement improved for students of all types, including black, Hispanic, and low-income students in the first decade of NCLB (2003–11).



As shown in the table below, the range of gains in student achievement differed vastly from state to state, with two jurisdictions—Maryland and the District of Columbia—gaining close to 50 points each. Ten states improved by fewer than 10 points, and two states—Iowa and West Virginia—lost ground.

Top Five States		Bottom Five States	
State	NAEP Score Gain	State	NAEP Score Gain
District of Columbia	49.9	Michigan	5.3
Maryland	46.0	New York	3.0
New Jersey	35.5	Oregon	1.3
Massachusetts	35.4	Iowa	-0.4
Hawaii	35.4	West Virginia	-1.9

The report finds that regardless of whether NCLB should be maintained, or whether states should have full jurisdiction over education policy, the states with the highest-quality standards and plans for implementation showed the greatest gains in student achievement. “The lesson for the future is not that it’s time for the states to take the lead in promoting equality,” the report reads. “It’s that the nation should ensure that all states learn from the successes of the few.”

As the federal government continues to issue states waivers from key provisions of NCLB, *New State Achievement Gap* recommends that it take two important steps to achieve the law’s goal of improving equity in education. First, the federal government should use waiver implementation to study what state measures lead to achievement gains.

Next, the federal government needs to be proactive in holding states accountable for adhering to and advancing states’ proposed waiver plans. The report recommends doing this by insisting on improved achievement on the NAEP or the forthcoming assessments aligned with the Common

Core State Standards. If the federal government takes both of these steps, NCLB waivers can help the nation come closer to understanding how best to achieve the promise of ESEA.

“As Congress looks for a workable new version of ESEA, it could consider allowing states to choose one of two paths for implementation,” the report reads. “One path would follow the research-based practices of the most successful states, over the last decade and the next few years. Another would allow states to chart their own courses, subject to NAEP accountability. In any case, the federal government would recognize that it will never have all the answers, and states would be free to lead the way—so long as all students achieve.”

New State Achievement Gap is available at <http://bit.ly/1bL3MAr>.

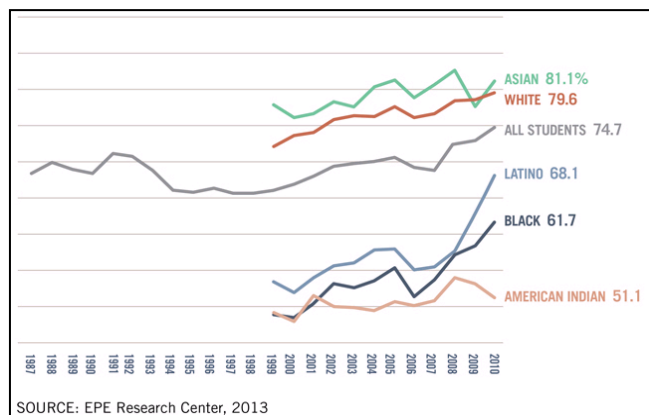


DIPLOMAS COUNT: National High School Graduation Rate Highest Since 1973, Finds Annual Education Week/Editorial Projects in Education Report

The national high school graduation rate reached 74.7 percent for the Class of 2010, an increase of 7.9 percentage points since 2000 and the highest percentage since 1973, according to the annual *Diplomas Count* report from *Education Week* and the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. This year’s report, *Second Chances: Turning Dropouts Into Graduates*, projects that although more than 1 million students will fail to graduate from high school this year, there are 96,000 fewer dropouts compared to last year.

“A decade ago, as concerns about the nation’s graduation rate were just starting to gain public attention, only two-thirds of U.S. students were finishing high school with a diploma,” said **Christopher B. Swanson, vice president of Editorial Projects in Education**, the nonprofit organization that publishes *Education Week*. “Now, the graduation rate for America’s public schools stands just shy of 75 percent. At the current pace of improvement, the graduation rate could reach an all-time high within the next few years.”

The report credits much of the overall improvement to gains among students of color. According to the report, the high school graduation rate for Latino students grew by 16 percentage points to 68.1 percent between 2000 and 2010; the rate for black students rose by 13 percentage points to 61.7 percent. As a result, the gap between graduation rates for white and Latino students was cut in half in the last decade while the black-white gap declined by nearly 30 percent. Still, graduation rates



for Latino and black students continue to trail those of Asian (81.1 percent) and white students (79.6 percent), even as increases for the latter two groups have slowed. The graduation rate for Native American students improved only slightly since 2000 and actually decreased since 2008.

Thirteen states had high school graduation rates of at least 80 percent while six states’ rates were below 66 percent.

Top Five		Bottom Five	
State	Graduation Rate	State	Graduation Rate
Vermont	85.0%	District of Columbia	57.0%
North Dakota	84.0%	New Mexico	59.4%
Wisconsin	83.7%	South Carolina	61.5%
Iowa	83.2%	Nevada	62.7%
Pennsylvania	83.0%	Georgia	64.0%

States showing the greatest improvements from 2000 to 2010 were Tennessee, where its graduation rate rose 31.5 percentage points (48.8 percent to 80.3 percent), and Florida, which increased its rate by 23.0 percentage points (49.9 percent to 72.9 percent).

The report also tracks high school graduation rates in the nation’s fifty largest school districts, ranking Fairfax County (VA) first with a graduation rate of 85 percent, followed closely by Baltimore (MD) and Montgomery County (MD) with 84 percent. Detroit, with a graduation rate of less than 50 percent, ranks last.

The graduation rates included in the report are based on Swanson’s Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI), which includes data from three grade-to-grade promotions (9 to 10, 10 to 11, and 11 to 12), as well as the number of students who ultimately earn a diploma. It represents the percentage of public high school freshmen who complete high school on time with a regular diploma. The CPI is not as accurate as a four-year cohort rate, which tracks individual students throughout their high school career, but because the cohort rate has only been publically reported at the state level, the CPI gives valuable insight into the national high school graduation rate, as well as graduation rates for individual school districts.

In addition to providing the latest high school graduation rates, the report investigates interventions that target out-of-school youth and includes an analysis of the nation’s “recoverable” youth, which it defines as individuals between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one who are not in school and who have not completed a high school education. It estimates that there are 1.8 million recoverable youth nationwide.

The complete report is available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2013/06/06/>.

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).