



# Straight A's

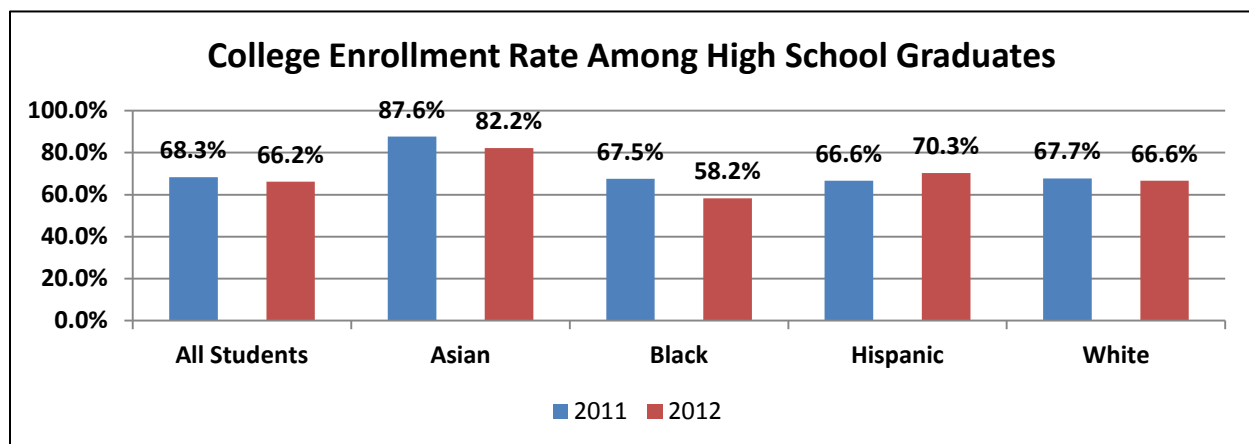
Public Education Policy And Progress



## SEE YOU IN THE FALL?: College Enrollment Rate Drops for High School Graduates; Hispanic Graduates More Likely to Enroll in Higher Education than Their White Peers

Sixty-six percent of high school graduates from the Class of 2012 were enrolled in colleges or universities in October 2012, a slight decline from the 68.3 percent rate one year earlier for the Class of 2011, according to an April 17 report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The college enrollment rate was higher for young women (71.3 percent) than for young men (61.3 percent).

In addition to the overall decline in college enrollment rates from 2011 to 2012, nearly every student subgroup saw its rate decline as well. One notable exception is the rate for Hispanic graduates, which increased by nearly 4 percentage points from 66.6 percent to 70.3 percent, moving them from fourth in 2011 to second-highest in 2012, trailing only Asian graduates (82.2 percent). As shown in the graph below, the biggest decline was among black graduates, whose enrollment rate fell from 67.5 percent—essentially a tie for second-highest in 2011—to 58.2 percent in 2012, a drop of nearly 10 percentage points.



“The recession convinced many young American high-school graduates to take refuge in college instead of try their luck in a lousy job market,” [Wall Street Journal reporter Neil Shah writes](#) in reaction to the report. “[This] research indicates that trend may be unwinding ... some high-school graduates are becoming more confident about their job prospects after years of hiding out by going to college.”

Shah notes that the college enrollment rate rose steadily to a record high of 70.1 percent when the U.S. economy sank into recession between 2007 and 2009, but he adds that the current rate of

66.2 percent is the lowest since 2006. “The implosion of America’s construction industry, for example, meant fewer jobs for young men looking for work right out of high school,” he writes. “Now it appears some of these young graduates are going on the job market again.”

Although more young people might be looking for jobs, this does not mean they will be successful. According to the report, the unemployment rate for young people who dropped out of high school between October 2011 and October 2012 was 49.6 percent, compared to 34.4 percent for graduates from the Class of 2012 who were not enrolled in college.

The data was not much better among a larger group of young people—those aged sixteen to twenty-four—who were not enrolled in high school or some form of higher education in October 2012; the unemployment rate for this group was 16.5 percent. Among those without a high school diploma, the unemployment rate was 28.7 percent. The unemployment rates of young men and women with at least a bachelor’s degree were much lower—8.0 percent and 6.2 percent, respectively.

The complete report is available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgec.nr0.htm>.

#### **Fast Facts: Unemployment Rate Increases for High School Dropouts Aged Twenty-Five and Older**

Although the national unemployment rate ticked down slightly from 7.6 percent in March to 7.5 percent in April, the unemployment rate for individuals aged twenty-five years and older without a high school diploma increased from 11.1 percent to 11.6 percent, according to the May 3 jobs report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The unemployment rate for high school graduates decreased from 7.6 percent to 7.4 percent, but it increased from 3.8 to 3.9 percent for college graduates. The rate was unchanged at 6.4 percent for individuals who had taken some college courses or earned an associate’s degree.

The complete report is available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t04.htm>.



#### ***POLICY IMPLICATIONS ON PREPARING FOR HIGHER STANDARDS: College- and Career-Ready Standards Can Help Close Perception Gap on Student Preparedness, ACT Curriculum Survey Finds***

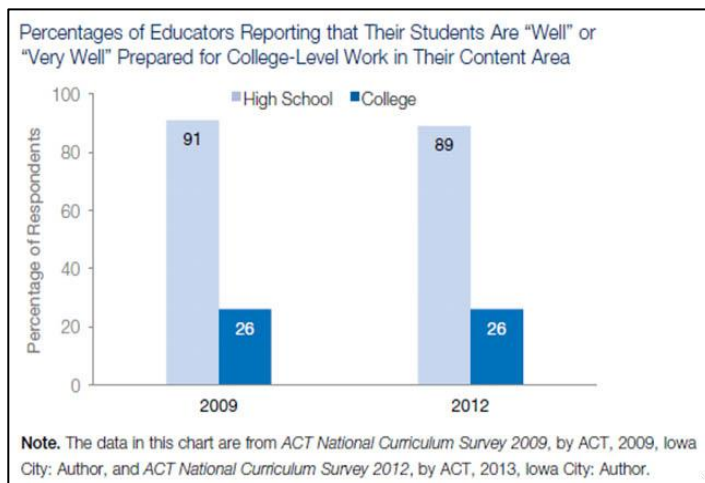
A large gap persists between how prepared high school teachers believe their graduating students are for college-level course work and what college instructors expect their first-year students to know, according to the 2012 ACT National Curriculum Survey. The report, *Policy Implications on Preparing for Higher Standards*, finds that while improved standards—such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or ACT’s College Readiness Standards—are intended to close this gap, states, districts, schools, and teachers need to ensure they are prepared to teach college- and career-ready standards. The report offers policy recommendations to assist states in their preparation.

“When high school teachers believe their students are well prepared for college-level courses, but colleges disagree, we have a problem,” [said Jon Erickson, ACT’s president of education](#). “If we are to improve the college and career readiness of our nation’s high school graduates, we must make sure that our standards are aligned between high school and college. States have

raised expectations by increasing educational standards over the past few years. This report provides an important reminder that we also need to bring school curricula up to the same heightened expectations.”

As shown in the graph to the right, nearly 90 percent of high school teachers surveyed believe that their students are prepared for college-level work, compared to 26 percent of college instructors who believe the same. Those percentages are largely unchanged since 2009.

The report offers three policy recommendations to help states in the pursuit of college and career readiness for all students.



First, the report recommends increasing and improving the amount and quality of professional development about college- and career-ready standards at the K–12 level. The report singles out the importance of high school, where teachers should be educated on the skills their students will need to succeed and how those skills should be taught. The report states that teachers should also have access to quality, continuing professional development to enhance their understanding of the higher standards and ways to improve teaching and learning.

Second, the report recommends that K–12 educators and college instructors collaborate to ensure the higher standards and new curriculum align with the skills needed for students to succeed in postsecondary work. Initiatives that bring educators from all levels together will mediate the expectations gap between these two sets of educators, the report notes.

The final recommendation encourages states and districts to reallocate resources toward equipping students with adequate and quality access to digital technology. With the implementation of higher standards, states will transition to computer-based assessments that are capable of measuring more in-depth knowledge and skills than paper multiple-choice tests. Schools without access to computer technology will be incapable of accessing these higher-order assessments.

Along with the primary finding of the continued perception gap in student preparedness for college between K–12 educators and college-level instructors, the report includes several other findings regarding the CCSS. For example, the report finds a varying degree of familiarity with the standards among teachers surveyed. Specifically, about a quarter of teachers know a lot about the standards, another quarter knows a little, and about half know a “moderate amount.”

Among those aware of the CCSS, 59 percent of middle school teachers, 64 percent of high school teachers, and 50 percent of college developmental instructors said the standards will improve student readiness for college “slightly” or “a great deal.” The proportions of educators

who responded “I don’t know” to this question range from nearly one-third to almost half—something the report attributes to a lack of familiarity with the details of the standards.

Addressing the new computer-based assessments that will accompany the CCSS, the report finds that many classrooms need better and/or more secure access to computer technology in order to administer these new assessments. Only 11 percent and 16 percent, respectively, of middle and high school teachers said their students either bring computers to their classes or that their classrooms contain computers. Most other teachers need access to the school’s computer lab to take computer-based assessments, but 10 percent said they could not provide simultaneous computer access to all of their students.

The National Curriculum Survey is conducted every three to five years. The survey asks educators what they think about the curriculum they teach, if assessments adequately measure the skills taught, and what content and knowledge they believe students need to know to be successful in current and future course work. The 2012 survey included elementary teachers for the first time, positing that early childhood education is important for later high school performance.

“You can’t do a good job of measuring whether students are learning the necessary skills to be on track for college and career readiness without knowing what educators are actually teaching and what is expected of students,” said Erickson. “Our research has been providing that information to ACT—along with educators and policymakers—for more than 20 years.”

*ACT National Curriculum Survey 2012: Policy Implications on Preparing for Higher Standards* is available at <http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/NCS-PolicySummary2012.pdf>.



***AN EMERGING FEDERAL ROLE FOR COMPETENCY EDUCATION: New KnowledgeWorks Policy Brief Identifies Federal Accountability and Assessment Systems as Challenges to Competency-Based Education Systems***

In a competency-based education system, a student advances from grade-to-grade based on mastery of course content, not on the number of days spent in the classroom. A new policy brief from KnowledgeWorks examines the growing national movement toward a competency-based education and highlights key barriers within the federal accountability and assessment systems that pose a challenge to this work. The brief, *An Emerging Federal Role for Competency Education*, is the first in a series from KnowledgeWorks to help policymakers define the appropriate role for the federal government supporting competency education in the nation’s K–12 schools.

According to the brief, competency education “empowers students to demonstrate mastery of a wide range of knowledge and skills at their own pace.” Such an approach, it argues, gives graduates an ability to “showcase true mastery of learning instead of a transcript that tells colleges and future employers little more than an accumulation of credits or classes.”

“The U.S. education system for too long has been geared toward adults that operate the system and not the children who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of the system,” [said Matt](#)

[Williams, KnowledgeWorks' vice president of national policy and innovation](#). “Competency education turns that assumption on its head, because learning becomes personalized for students, meeting them where they are. Our hope is that policymakers embrace this new approach and truly help students prepare for college and career.”

Although it calls the adoption of new college- and career-ready standards a “significant step in the right direction,” the brief says those standards will not achieve their intended impact unless they are accompanied by “dynamic” instructional programs that enable students to engage in “deeper learning,” which emphasizes mastery of content standards and the transferable skills critical to success in college and today’s workforce. It argues that successful implementation of the standards will depend on the adoption of models like competency education that challenge learners to apply standards through mastery of deeper learning objectives.

“A competency education system puts students at the center, replacing rigid time-based structures with flexible learning environments that ensure students receive the support and extra time they need to succeed,” the brief reads. “This highly-personalized approach provides clear, individualized pathways to student proficiency that help mobilize stakeholders around the collective goal of college and career readiness for all students.”

The brief includes a “competency education continuum,” which shows how school culture, learning progression, learning pace, instruction, assessment systems, and grading policies change as a school moves from a traditional approach toward an “emerging” competency-based system. It notes that such a system will “begin to see significant improvements in the quality of learning,” including increases in student engagement and performance and graduates who are better prepared for the transition to college and a career. Schools taking the next step—a full-scale competency model—will see “learning happening everywhere,” with students taking control of their education and educators playing a dynamic role in personalizing every day of the learning experience for their students.

Pointing to early leadership by New Hampshire, Maine, and Oregon, which, along with Iowa, have implemented statewide policies to redesign their education systems to support competency-based learning at scale, the brief identifies “significant milestones” at every level of the education system that represent a shift toward this new system. For example, one or more districts in at least forty states are implementing competency education, and thirty-nine states have enacted seat-time waivers or competency education laws.

Even with these gains, however, the brief argues that the success of the movement “depends heavily” on the federal government’s willingness to partner with states and school districts as they design these systems. “A true partnership will grant states the flexibility to innovate and develop equally ambitious accountability and assessment policies that better align with student centered education to ensure all students graduate with the knowledge and skills to succeed,” the brief notes.

The federal government has yet to move beyond small innovation grants and guidance to postsecondary institutions in its advancement of competency education, the brief notes. As a result, the work on the ground is disconnected from federal accountability and assessment

systems. The brief calls this disconnection the greatest barrier to the implementation of this work because it forces implementers to juggle two systems: one required by federal law and one developed by the educators, students, parents, and community leaders committed to successful implementation of competency education.

As an example of this disconnection, the brief notes that the federal accountability system under the No Child Left Behind Act requires states to report annual performance of districts and schools but “does little to support continuous improvement of the education system.” This annual nature of the federal system raises “significant challenges” for competency implementers who “generate summative and formative data continuously according to student learning pace, not school year,” the brief says. Additionally, it notes that the heavy federal emphasis on English and math scores does not represent the depth of learning in competency-based schools where students “are expected to master standards and transferrable workforce and social and emotional skills.”

The brief identifies similar problems with the nation’s current assessment system. Again, the annual nature of current assessments is an issue; in a competency environment, a student would not have to wait until the end of the year to demonstrate mastery of concepts achieved earlier in the year. The good news is that two state-led assessment consortia, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium are working to develop next generation assessments, as well as real-time digital assessment systems, all of which are aligned with the new the Common Core State Standards that will “provide educators with timely and meaningful feedback on student performance so all stakeholders in the system can better target instruction and support,” the brief notes.

*An Emerging Federal Role for Competency Education* is available at <http://bit.ly/13WGXaD>.

### **Additional Resources on Competency-Based Education**

Released on January 22, 2013 by the Alliance for Excellent Education, [Strengthening High School Teaching and Learning in New Hampshire’s Competency-Based System](#), profiles two high schools in New Hampshire that moved away from “seat time” toward a competency-based system. The report also examines the changes that were necessary to make competency-based advancement an important part of New Hampshire’s strategy for implementing the Common Core State Standards and ensuring that students graduate ready for college and a career.

In conjunction with the report’s release, the Alliance held a webinar featuring **New Hampshire Department of Education Deputy Commissioner Paul Leather** and two educators from New Hampshire who discussed local design and implementation of competency-based systems and personalized pathways and the impact on practice. Archived video and PowerPoint slides from the webinar are available at <http://media.all4ed.org/webinar-jan-22-2013>.



### **UPDATES FROM PARCC: New Materials Get “Under the Hood” of Next Generation Assessments Currently in Development**

On April 30, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) released a series of documents, including assessment blueprints and evidence statement tables, for the English language arts and mathematics assessments set to debut in 2014–15. The documents were created to help educators and the general public better understand the design of

the PARCC assessments. Along with the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, PARCC is working to create assessments that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

“These tools will help educators assist staff in both teaching the CCSS and in designing common classroom-based assessments that will help students become college and career ready and to succeed on the PARCC assessments,” said **Cindy Journell-Hoch, an elementary teacher specialist for school administration and leadership for Frederick County Public Schools in Maryland.**

The blueprints shed light on the design of the assessments. They define the total number of tasks and/or items for any given assessment component, the standards measured, the item types, and the point values for each. Evidence statement tables and evidence statements describe the knowledge and skills that an assessment item or a task elicits from students.

“The release of the blueprint and test specification materials comes at a time when teachers are eager to understand how PARCC will assess the CCSS,” said **Wendi Anderson, director for PARCC/Innovative Assessment at the Arizona Department of Education.** “These materials allow teachers to see ‘under the hood’ of the assessment, to understand how the different elements work together to assess student mastery of the CCSS.”

More information about the assessment blueprints and test specifications, including narrated overview PowerPoints and answers to frequently asked questions are available at <http://www.parcconline.org/assessment-blueprints-test-specs>.

#### **Reminder: PARCC Seeking Public Comment**

The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) has two draft policies currently out for public comment:

(1) Draft Grade- and Subject-Specific Performance Level Descriptors (PLDs): All draft PLDs, supporting documents, and online survey are posted at [www.parcconline.org/plds](http://www.parcconline.org/plds). The public review and comment period ends May 8.

(2) Draft PARCC Accommodations Manual for students with disabilities and English learners: The draft Accommodations Manual, supporting documents, and online survey are posted at [www.parcconline.org/parcc-draft-accommodations-manual](http://www.parcconline.org/parcc-draft-accommodations-manual). The public review and comment period ends May 13.

***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](http://www.all4ed.org). Follow the Alliance on Twitter ([www.twitter.com/all4ed](http://www.twitter.com/all4ed)), Facebook ([www.facebook.com/all4ed](http://www.facebook.com/all4ed)), and the Alliance's "High School Soup" blog ([www.all4ed.org/blog](http://www.all4ed.org/blog)).