



ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

Straight A's:

Public Education
Policy and Progress

Volume 3, No. 11: June 10, 2003



HOUSE COMMITTEE MARKS-UP TEACHER QUALITY BILL: Proposal Includes Loan Forgiveness for Teachers

On June 10, two bills that are designed to improve the recruitment, training, and retention of high-quality teachers in high-needs areas were marked up by the House Education and Workforce Committee. Both bills were reported out of committee and are now ready for consideration on the floor of the House of Representatives.

H.R. 438, the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Act of 2003, introduced by **Rep. Joe Wilson (R-SC)**, would build on the current \$5,000 loan forgiveness provision in the Higher Education Act. It would increase college loan forgiveness to up to \$17,500 for every math, science, and special education teacher who teaches for five years in a Title I school. This provision would not replace the current \$5,000 loan forgiveness program for every Title I teacher. The committee rejected amendments that would have made the additional loan forgiveness provision available to Title I teachers in all subjects, Head Start teachers, and teachers in rural school districts.

Ready-to-Teach Act Receives Committee Approval

The second bill approved by committee would improve the quality of teachers produced by teacher training programs at institutions of higher education. It would also raise standards for teacher certification and licensure at the state level. *H.R. 2211, the Ready-to-Teach Act*, would hold teacher-training programs accountable for the teachers they produce and ensure that they possess the necessary skills to be highly qualified and ready to teach when they enter the classroom. It would also work to ensure that states only allow highly qualified individuals to teach in their schools.

Under the *Ready-to-Teach Act*, 45 percent of available funds would go to states to help them reform teacher certification requirements, provide alternatives to traditional teacher certification programs, and help them attract qualified individuals from other professions into the classroom. The bill would also allow states to develop and implement strategies to attract highly qualified teachers and principals into traditionally hard-to-staff areas.

House Committee Marks-Up Teacher Quality Bill

(Continued from p. 1)

For instance, it would allow for differential and bonus pay for principals and teachers in high-needs subjects such as reading, math, science, and special education, as well as teachers in high-poverty or rural schools. It would encourage teacher advancement and retention activities by channeling high-quality teachers into careers as mentors and exemplary teachers.

For institutions of higher education, 45 percent of available funds would go toward partnership grants to teacher training programs in return for increased accountability measures and higher standards for graduates. These reforms would be designed to ensure that graduates are highly qualified before they leave a college campus. Grantees could use funds to provide sustained and high-quality clinical experience to their students before they enter the classroom. Additionally, funding could be made available for ongoing professional development once a graduate enters the classroom.

According to **Rep. Howard P. “Buck” McKeon (R-CA)**, the Chairman of the 21st Century Competitiveness Subcommittee, “More than half of the 2.2 million teachers that America’s schools will need to hire over the next 10 years will be first-time teachers. For this reason,” he says, “the nation’s attention has increasingly focused on the role that institutions of higher education and states play in ensuring that new teachers have the content knowledge and teaching skills they need to ensure that all students are held to higher standards.”

The remaining 10 percent of the *Ready-to-Teach Act* will go toward teacher recruitment grants. Money awarded under this section will allow states or institutions of higher education alike to award scholarships to help students pay the costs of tuition, room, board, and other expenses related to completing a teacher preparation program. It also allows grantees to provide support services to scholarship recipients to help them complete their postsecondary education. Funds can also be used for teacher induction programs for former scholarship recipients during the first three years of their teacher career.

To address the problem of a lack of minority teachers in our nation’s classrooms, the subcommittee passed an amendment by **Rep. Max Burns (R-GA)** that would create “teacher centers of excellence.” Specifically, the amendment would target historically minority-based colleges to establish centers that would recruit and train minority college students to become highly qualified teachers. It was supported by the United Negro College Fund and the Hispanic Education Coalition and was adopted unanimously by voice vote.



STAND BY ME: Public Agenda Survey Reveals Teachers Views on Key Issues

A new survey by **Public Agenda** found that 76 percent of teachers feel they have become “scapegoats for all problems facing education” and a majority feel that they are unfairly being held accountable for raising student achievement when so much that affects learning is beyond their control. The report, *Stand by Me: What Teachers Really Think about Unions, Merit Pay and Other Professional Matters*, is based on a national random mail survey of 1,345 K-12 public school teachers conducted in the spring of 2003.

The report found that teachers feel pressure from all stakeholders, but often experience a lack of support in their work. For instance, 81 percent of teachers think parental involvement is key to success, but some parents leave teachers in the position of having to take on basic child-rearing tasks. And while 80 percent of teachers surveyed think guidelines for what students should know help improve academic performance, 93 percent believe education professionals, not elected officials, should set these standards.

Those surveyed said parental and student accusations, favoritism, fad educational solutions, and cost-cutting measures leave them relying on unions for support. While teachers know tenure tends to protect bad teachers, they still believe they need protection from unfair treatment. In fact, 78 percent of those teachers surveyed said their school had at least a few teachers “simply going through the motions” and 36 percent say it is too hard for administrators to remove any but the very worst.

The report also found that many teachers believe they are asked to perform the impossible. Even though they have confidence in their own skills, many teachers, especially those teaching in high schools, think it may not be possible for them to reach all students. In fact, high school teachers (27 percent) were less likely than elementary school teachers (42 percent) to feel very confident about getting through to most of their students by the end of the year. High school teachers were also four times more likely to choose “lack of student effort” as the hardest thing about teaching and half as likely as elementary school teachers to think, “What teachers do counts.”

The survey found that most teachers are receptive to alternative paying mechanisms that encourage teachers to work in hard-to-staff areas, or reward outstanding or hard-working teachers. Seventy percent support financial incentives for teachers in tough neighborhoods with lower performing students, and 67 percent believe that teachers who “consistently work harder, putting in more time and effort” should be paid more. On the other hand, 52 percent fear merit pay would lead to principals rewarding their favorite teachers instead of the good teachers.

Teachers also favor increased support for their new colleagues. Forty-five percent of teachers believe a large number of new teachers need more training on handling students with discipline problems, and 42 percent said new teachers need more training on effective ways to reach struggling students. Less than half of those surveyed said new teachers in their school get mentoring or support from experienced teachers.

The survey can be downloaded at Public Agenda’s Web site at:
<http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/standbyme/standbyme.htm>

New Teachers Struggle Amidst California's Budget Crunch

Although California currently has more than 50,000 teachers who are not fully credentialed and the state will need to hire 195,000 new teachers within the next 10 years, thousands of would-be California teachers are experiencing difficulty finding a job. The problem, at least in California appears not to be a shortage of qualified candidates, but their unwillingness to move into areas where high-quality teachers are needed most.

While jobs are plentiful in inner cities such as Los Angeles, openings have evaporated in other, more attractive areas of the state such as Sacramento. At a job fair in April, the Los Angeles school district said that it would have to hire 2,500 teachers this fall. However, recently certified teachers have expressed reservations about moving to work in low-performing, hard-to-staff schools such as those in Southern California. While teaching opportunities are available in other, more attractive schools throughout the state, they are usually only for teachers certified in special education, math, and science.

In its report, *Every Child a Graduate*, the Alliance has argued for financial incentives to attract high-quality teachers to hard-to-staff areas. The Alliance recommended a \$4,000 annual income tax credit as a powerful incentive to encourage America's best teachers and principals to accept the challenge of working in high-poverty schools. A similar proposal, sponsored by **Rep. Heather Wilson (R-NM)** has been introduced in Congress. By most recent count, Wilson's bill has 52 cosponsors--22 Republicans and 30 Democrats.

The Alliance also embraced President Bush's proposal to increase student loan forgiveness from the current \$5,000 to \$17,500 for highly qualified teachers who commit to teaching in high-needs schools for at least four years. This week the Education and the Workforce Committee marked up a similar bill that expands loan forgiveness for math, science, and special education teachers in high-needs areas. However, the Alliance has argued that while the percentage of teachers without a major or minor in their field is high in math and science, it is highest in history—55.1 percent of history teachers in low-achieving schools. Similarly, a quarter of low-achieving students have English teachers without a major or minor in that subject.



GRADUATION DAY FOR MANY, JUST ANOTHER DAY FOR OTHERS: Students, States Feel the Pressure of Exit Exams

Throughout this month, high school graduates from around the country will walk across stages in their high school auditoriums, gymnasiums, and football stadiums to receive their high school diplomas. However, hundreds of thousands of students will be left behind. These students can be divided into two groups: those who drop out and those who fail to pass state-mandated exit exams. Currently, 24 states either require students to pass an exit exam before receiving a high school diploma or have such tests currently in the works. Already, several states have considered postponing the testing requirement as part of receiving a high school diploma, while others are reevaluating the difficulty of the test itself.

Massachusetts' Schools Try to Navigate Around Testing Requirements

When it first passed its 1993 Education Reform Act, the Massachusetts legislature decided to require students, beginning with the class of 2003, to pass the 10th-grade Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam in order to graduate. Now, 10 years later, approximately 5,000 of the state's 60,000 high school seniors will fail this year's MCAS. As a result, some high schools in Massachusetts have navigated a path around the testing requirement while others have threatened to ignore it completely. At Hampshire Regional High School, all students who meet the school's other

requirements for graduation will get a diploma. Technically, however, these students will not graduate unless they pass the MCAS. Other schools have decided that any student who meets all other graduation requirements but fails the test will be issued a “certificate of attainment,” a document that may be considered of little value to college admission officers and future employers.

Nevada Students Struggle with Math Test

In Nevada, approximately 12 percent of the state’s senior class will not receive high school diplomas this spring because they have not passed the math portion of the state’s high school graduation test. In Clark County, NV, which includes Las Vegas, 13 percent of high school seniors have not passed the state test. According to an article in *The Washington Post* the problem is twofold: “Many students—as many as 40 percent statewide—have never taken algebra or geometry, which are included on the test. Also, school officials said, the fast-growing and financially strapped school district struggles to find qualified math teachers.”

State Officials in Florida and California Come Under Pressure as Thousands of Students Fail State Tests

Across around the country, state legislators have come under intense pressure to delay testing requirements. In Florida, Gov. Jeb Bush released results of the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test in the face of protests from minority leaders who believe the exam should not determine who graduates. Approximately 12,800 of Florida’s high school seniors, many of them either black or Hispanic, have yet to meet the requirements of the exam. In a move perhaps designed to placate his opponents, Gov. Bush last week signed a measure that directs the state Board of Education to study whether performance on national standardized tests like the SAT and the ACT can be substituted for passing the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

Legislators in California have gone one step further. Last week, the state Assembly passed a bill that would postpone California’s high school exit exam requirement for two years. Although passing a state exam for math and English-language skills is not a requirement until next year, a state-mandated study recently found that only 60 percent of students in the class of 2004 have passed the math portion so far. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, legislators are concerned about whether the exam could “withstand a legal challenge brought by students who contend they lacked adequate resources, such as qualified teachers, to help them learn the material on the exam.” The legislation must still pass through the state Senate and be signed by Gov. Gray Davis.

Virginia Governor Launches Program to Help Students Pass State Tests

Last week, Virginia Gov. Mark Warner announced the launch of a new program that would help thousands of Virginia high school students who risk failing the state’s Standards of Learning (SOL) test. The program includes summer academies to coach students in rural Southside Virginia, Internet tutorial programs, a long-distance learning program, and an expansion of a program that helps to manage student cases individually. The initiative will be financed with \$400,000 in federal funds and will begin as several pilot programs. If it is successful, it will expand statewide in the coming months.

Lack of Federal Funds at State Level Means Little Help for High School Students

Nationally, a common theme has emerged as states struggle with high school exit exams. High school students are not being properly prepared to meet new high standards and as a result are failing to graduate. In some cases, the problem stems from a shortage of high-quality teachers, in others, students' inability to read at grade level. Whatever the cause, money may be the answer in addressing the issue of already high dropout rates and an increasing number of students who stay in high school only to fail graduation tests.

While some states are scrambling to get their students ready for new exit exams, the federal government has done little, if anything, to be supportive. Indeed, there are only a few federal programs that focus on high school reform or on helping middle and high school students prepare for college. The Smaller Learning Communities initiative provides \$162 million per year to help large high schools develop smaller schools within a larger school, but funding for this program has been eliminated in the President's budget request.

In addition, the long-established TRIO program and the newly established GEAR UP initiative seek to help young people graduate from high school and get on the path to college. However, the TRIO program, despite its record of success, currently serves only about 10 percent of eligible young people. Other federal funds are available through the Carl Perkins Vocational Act for secondary schools, but these funds are also cut in the President's budget request. Presently, there is no specific formula-driven program that targets students most in need of help at the high school level except the woefully underfunded Title I program—and even then, only 5 percent of all Title I funds reach high school students.

With few federal dollars going to high schools, many districts are having a difficult time providing the support services that some students need to help them pass these high-stakes exit exams. Without additional help, some states, as the California example proves, may be forced to delay the enforcement of their testing requirement, or perhaps lower the standard to which they hold their students.



EDUCATION MANDATES, TIGHT STATE BUDGETS FORCE STATES TO CONSIDER OTHER FUNDING ALTERNATIVES

Faced with tight education budgets, some states are asking voters to reach into their wallets and provide extra funding for schools by approving an increase in their property tax rates. Last week, voters in New York and California, states with two of the largest budget gaps, were asked to consider raising taxes at the local level that would benefit education funding. As expected, there was widespread approval in New York, but elected officials were surprised that there was only scattered support in California.

In New York, 94 percent of the nearly 700 school districts approved the proposed tax increases for schools. That is one of the highest approval rates on record, and is well above the average approval rate for tax increases (82 percent) over the last 30 years. According to the *New York Times*, "The sweeping approvals mean that, with few exceptions, school budgets will go up by an average of 4.1 percent in the coming

academic year, all at a time when the state's contribution to education has shrunk." To pay for the increases, school districts are expected to raise local property taxes by 7.4 percent.

When presented with a similar opportunity to increase funding for education, California voters were not as willing as their east coast counterparts to accept a new tax. Statewide, voters approved a new "parcel tax" in only nine districts out of a possible 19 that considered the new tax. In the nine districts where it was approved, the parcel tax will be "a set amount added to each piece of property for a special period of time," according to the *Los Angeles Times*. Of the 11 districts that failed to get the two-thirds vote in favor of the tax, district leaders say they will be forced to increase class size, lay off teachers, forgo buying textbooks, and cut music, art, and other programs.

Read the *New York Times* article at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/05/nyregion/05EDUC.html>

Read the *Los Angeles Times* article at:

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-election5jun05,1,4965824.story>



AMERICA'S BEST HIGH SCHOOLS?: Washington Post Education Reporter Ranks Top Secondary Schools

In a recent article for *Newsweek*, **Jay Mathews**, education reporter and columnist for *The Washington Post* takes on the task of naming what he believes are the 100 best high schools in America. Mathews ranks the schools according to his "Challenge Index," a tool that ranks public schools according to the ratio of Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) tests taken by all students divided by the number of graduating seniors. In an accompanying article, Mathews explains that AP and IB tests "are most likely to stretch young minds—which should be the fundamental purpose of education."

Mathews argues that AP and IB tests are especially important in exposing inner-city students to a level of instruction once reserved for honor students. For example, according to Mathews, AP participation by underrepresented minority students has increased 77 percent and participation by low-income students has increased by 101 percent.

The *Newsweek* story is available at:

<http://www.msnbc.com/news/917011.asp?0cv=KA01>

The *Washington Post* article is available at:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A44155-2003May27.html>

Straight A's: An Update on Public Education is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events both in Washington, D.C., 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. The Alliance for Excellent Education is a nonprofit organization working to make it possible for America's 6 million at-risk middle and high school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.



ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

1101 Vermont Ave., NW
Suite 411
Washington, DC 20005



**STRAIGHT A'S: AN UPDATE ON PUBLIC EDUCATION: POLICY AND PROGRESS.
JUNE 10, 2003**

Volume 3 No. 11: June 10, 2003

In this issue:

- House Committee Marks-Up Teacher Quality Bill: Proposal Includes Loan Forgiveness for Teachers
- Stand By Me: Public Agenda Survey Reveals Teachers Views on Key Issues
- Graduation Day for Many, Just Another Day for Others: Students, States Feel the Pressure of Exit Exams
- Education Mandates, Tight State Budgets Force States to Consider Other Funding Alternatives
- America's Best High Schools?: Washington Post Education Reporter Ranks Top Secondary Schools



ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

Alliance for Excellent Education 1101 Vermont Ave., NW Suite 411 Washington, DC 20005

Susan Frost, Executive Director; Jason Amos, Associate Editor
Phone: (202) 842-4888 Fax (202) 842-1613
Alliance@all4ed.org <http://www.all4ed.org>