



ALLIANCE FOR
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Straight A's:

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SEN. PATTY MURRAY INTRODUCES NEW HIGH SCHOOL BILL

Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) has introduced legislation that would reform the nation's secondary schools through a new focus on adolescent literacy, academic counselors, and a new grant program that will improve student achievement in low-performing secondary schools. S. 1554, the *Pathways for All Students to Succeed Act (PASS Act)*, introduced last week, builds upon findings in the Alliance for Excellent Education's *Every Child a Graduate* report and seeks to reach the older students who were largely left out of the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)*.

While the *No Child Left Behind Act* provides a strong framework for helping children in the early grades through the Reading First initiative, the nation still needs a comprehensive strategy to address the literacy problems and learning gaps of students in middle school and secondary school. According to the **National Assessment of Educational Progress—*The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2002***, the nation's 12th-graders are scoring lower than their counterparts did just 10 years ago. In the 2002 assessment, a lower percentage of 12th-graders performed at or above "basic" and at or above "proficient" than in 1992 and 1998. At the same time, fourth- and eighth-graders' scores went up, an indication that past investments in early education are paying off.

Meanwhile, the federal government has focused little attention on the unique needs of our nation's older students. In April 1983, then-U.S. **Secretary of Education T. H. Bell** released the landmark *A Nation At Risk* report that contained practical recommendations for educational improvement, with a particular focus on teenage youth and high schools. In the 20 years since the report's release, Congress has not considered a comprehensive high school bill. In fact, it has considered few pieces of legislation that deal with high schools since the standards-based reform movement began in 1983.

Some exceptions, however, do exist. For instance, **Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-NM)** has been successful in providing federal funding to increase access to advanced-placement tests for low-income high school students and to develop a school dropout prevention program. Another staunch supporter of high schools is **Rep. David Obey (D-WI)** whose work after the Columbine shootings resulted in the Smaller Learning Communities Program receiving federal funding for the first time. Obey was also responsible for targeting that funding for high schools. To this day, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and

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Technical Education Act, first created in 1917, and funded at a little over \$1.3 billion, remains the largest federal investment in secondary schools—though it is by no means a comprehensive high school bill.

Summary of the PASS Act

In the United States, approximately 3,000 students drop out of school every school day. This year alone, nearly 540,000 students will leave the American school system before graduation. In order to address this crisis, Sen. Murray’s PASS Act will ensure that secondary school students have the services and supports they need to read and write at or above their grade level, a skill that is critical to their ability to succeed academically. Building on the success of the Reading First program, the first component of the PASS Act will create “Reading to Succeed,” a \$1 billion grant program to establish effective, research-based reading and writing programs for students in grades six through 12.

The legislation authorizes grants to allow secondary schools to hire literacy coaches (at least one per 20 teachers), who will help teachers incorporate research-based literacy instruction into their mathematics, science, history, civics, geography, literature, language arts, and other core academic courses. Literacy coaches will help teachers identify students who need additional reading instruction, assess those students to determine their needs, and coordinate services to ensure students receive the assistance they need. They will also work with teachers to institute curricula that strengthen the reading and writing skills of all students.

Title II, “Creating Pathways to Success,” establishes grants to provide academic and career counseling, cultivate parent engagement and coordinate support services for at-risk high school students across the country. Careful planning, sound advice, and strong support are all critical to guiding students to success, but many of today’s counselors are struggling to serve too many students with too few resources. A proven method for success in any endeavor is setting goals and developing plans to achieve them. That is the essence of Title II. It will complement other successful high school programs by providing \$2 billion to support the hiring and placement of academic counselors (at a rate of at least one academic counselor for every 150 students). These individuals will work directly with students, parents and teachers to develop six-year plans outlining the path each student in a high-need school will take to reach his or her goals.

Title III, “Fostering Successful Secondary Schools,” focuses on turning around those schools that have been identified as “in need of improvement” under the *NCLB*. The legislation would make available \$500 million in grants that these secondary schools would use to implement research-based programs to improve student achievement in low-performing secondary schools. Some strategies for turning schools around include developing smaller learning communities, and instituting adolescent literacy programs, block scheduling, whole school reform, and individualized learning plans.

A Nation At Risk

When former Secretary Bell released *A Nation at Risk* 20 years ago, the letter of transmittal accompanying the report said that the problems outlined in *A Nation At Risk* could be overcome by a national movement for change in education policy:

“The Commission deeply believes that the problems we have discerned in American education can be both understood and corrected if the people of our country, together with those who have public responsibility in the matter, care enough and are courageous enough to do what is required.”

As the nation’s graduation rates hover around 69 percent, according to Jay Greene at the Manhattan Institute, these words ring as true today as they did more than 20 years ago.



HOUSTON, WE HAVE A SIMILAR PROBLEM: New York City Struggles to Accurately Count Dropouts

New York City schools are facing charges reminiscent of the recent accusations against the Houston Independent School District, according to the *New York Times*. The *Times* is reporting that many of the city’s public schools are trying to improve their graduation rates by pushing out students who struggle academically. This strategy presumably would improve the school’s statistics by recording students as going to “auxiliary services” programs rather than as dropouts.

Citing a report by Advocates for Children, the article notes that New York City schools discharged more than 55,000 high school students during the 2000-2001 school year—a number that dwarfs the 34,000 students who actually graduated from high school. “It’s not a new problem, it’s just worse,” said **Elisa Hyman, a deputy director of Advocates for Children**. “We’ve had guidance counselors calling on their cell phones from the bathroom saying they’ve been told to get rid of kids,” she told the *Times*.

The problem of encouraging, or even forcing, lower-performing students to leave school is not confined to New York City and Houston. Under the *No Child Left Behind Act*, schools with low graduation rates risk falling into the “in need of improvement” category, where they could face federal sanctions. In Miami, school officials are investigating a principal who tried to remove students he viewed as a drag on the school’s test scores.

Meanwhile, in New York City, scores of students who have not completed high school are rushing to sign up for General Educational Development (G.E.D.) diploma classes, which traditionally serve low-income adults and immigrants. However, according to Azi Ellowitch, a teacher at the Lehman College Adult Learning Center, more and more young students are registering for a G.E.D. program. “These are kids who have gone back and forth, and have fallen behind,” she told the *New York Times*. “Schools don’t seem to know what to do with that. Those kids are the least appropriate for the G.E.D. program. If they need brushing up, we can certainly help them. But that’s not what most of these kids need. They need years of basic learning.”

At the same time, an unconventional view is gaining currency among some educators who argue that some students would be better served if they could “escape from the

Houston, We Have a Similar Problem

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routine and irrelevancies of an American secondary school” before graduation. In a June column in the *Washington Post* entitled, “Is Dropping Out of High School Always Bad?,” Jay Mathews wrote about the ideas of Ron Wolk, the creator of *Education Week*. Wolk claims that some students, usually those unchallenged by typical high school fare, might be better served by dropping out of high school and beginning work on a G.E.D.

In his most recent column Mathews explores the practical application of Wolk’s ideas through the stories of several high school students who dropped out of school and have already earned several hours of college credit at a community college by the time their classmates graduate from high school.

Read the *New York Times* article at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/31/nyregion/31PUSH.html?hp>

The Jay Matthews article is available at:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A62192-2003Jul29.html>



URBAN STUDENTS FALLING BEHIND: Reading and Writing Scores Lag in Six U.S. Cities

Fourth- and eighth-grade students in six large U.S. cities are performing below average in reading and writing when compared to their peers in other parts of the country. In the first ever urban-district study the **National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)** tested fourth- and eighth graders in Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, New York City, and Washington, D.C.

The NAEP study found that while the average score for all fourth-grade students in the nation’s public schools was 217, students in the six cities scored much lower at 208. Similarly, the average national score for eighth-graders was 263, but students from the urban centers average score was 254. Of the six cities that participated in the eighth-grade assessment, Atlanta scored the lowest at 236 and Chicago scored the highest at 249.

In the writing assessment, the average score for fourth-grade students in each of the urban districts was lower than the national average score except in New York City and Houston, where the average scores were not significantly different from the national average score. At the eighth-grade level, students’ average scores in all five (New York City did not meet the required participation guidelines for grade eight) urban districts were lower than the national average.

Complete results from the reading and writing assessments are available at:

<http://www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>



A CAPITAL IDEA: Key Leaders in Washington, D.C., Push for Vouchers for D.C. Students

By deciding to postpone a floor vote on the 2004 spending bill for the District of Columbia until early September, House leaders effectively put off a vote on a separate bill that would create a private-school voucher program in Washington, D.C. Believing that legislators would be less likely to vote against an appropriations bill, Republican leaders have worked together on a plan that would link the *DC School Voucher bill* (H.R. 2556) to the spending bill for the District.

The D.C. spending bill would earmark \$10 million for a new school choice program in Washington, D.C., that would provide up to \$7,500 to lower-income Washington, D.C., children currently enrolled in poorly performing schools to help pay for tuition at private schools in the area.

While touting the choice initiative at a Washington, D.C., charter school early last month, President Bush noted that the city's fourth- and eighth-graders scored lower in reading than their counterparts in each of the 50 states, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress reading exam results. However, many educators consider such a comparison unfair because the District has an urban school system that lacks traditionally higher-performing suburban scores from which most states scores receive a boost. According to a study by Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute, Washington, D.C., schools have the third-lowest graduation rate in the country (58 percent) ahead of only Georgia (56 percent) and Florida (55 percent).

Recent evidence that the voucher movement is gaining ground in the District includes the public endorsement of **D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams (D)** and **Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA)** who have now joined the fight for private school vouchers. Mayor Williams says his support is contingent upon increased federal funding for Washington, D.C., public schools. Sen. Feinstein, in a letter to the *Washington Post*, said that she is supporting the proposal because she believes that "education is a local issue and that if the mayor wants this program, it should be given the chance to work."



HARRY POTTER MEETS OLIVER TWIST: Popular Fiction Joins Classical Literature on Summer Reading Lists

Think back to your days in high school and the inevitable summer reading list. For many, a quick glance at the reading list composed of Shakespeare, Dickens, and Twain, combined with the subsequent trip to the bookstore, brought a rush of excitement: "Look at all the great books I'll get to read this summer," or "I can't wait to start reading such-and-such."

However, after the initial excitement fades, the reality of a stack of literature one or two feet high begins to set in. Today, amidst the temptations of trips to the beach, Instant Messaging, and the Real World marathon on MTV, it's likely that few books on the reading list are actually finished, if started at all. In an effort to reintroduce today's students to the joy of reading, many teachers are substituting the classics with more recent works by John Grisham, Mary Higgins Clark, and J.K. Rowling.

Popular Fiction Joins Classical Literature on Summer Reading Lists

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In a recent article in the *Washington Post*, Christina A. Samuels writes that the summer reading required by Washington-area teachers and librarians is “moving away from time-honored works of literature to popular fiction.” The article explains that the logic behind the movement is to keep kids reading. For educators, the most important thing that a student can learn in the summer is that reading books isn’t drudgery.

Betsy Brown, program supervisor for secondary literature and language arts for Montgomery County schools, is quoted as saying that a student who doesn’t read at all during the summer will face serious consequences in the fall. This applies to all students, “from very young children who have to be reminded how to read, to older students who don’t perform well on standardized tests because their comprehension skills have slipped,” according to Brown.

New Study Finds that Time Spent Online Can Raise Classroom Performance

According to a Michigan State University study, low-income children who spend a good deal of time on the Web do slightly better in school than children who do not. The 16-month study included 140 school-age children. Those who spent more than 30 minutes a day on the Internet saw their grade point averages increase from 2.0 to 2.2 or higher and their scores in standardized reading tests improve noticeably as well.

According to Michigan State psychology professor Linda Jackson, who conducted the study, the reason for academic improvement is simple: “Spending time online means spending time reading,” she said in a *Cox News Service* interview. “When you’re on the Web, you have to read a lot of text.” Not surprisingly, the children apparently did not spend all their time on the Internet learning. They spent some time looking at pornography, playing online games, and downloading music. They spent the most time online, however, researching school projects or hobbies and interests.

“Kids might not be reading books anymore, but they are reading Web pages,” Jackson said. “I’m not saying we should burn up all the libraries. . . but maybe this is a sign of the future.”

Read the complete summer reading list article:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A59214-2003Jul28.html>

Read more about the Internet study at:

<http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/0728netkids-ON.html>

DATELINE NBC TO COVER ADULT READING PROGRAM

Friday, August 8, 8:00 p.m.: Dateline NBC will air a program about four adults with different educational backgrounds who needed help learning how to read and write, their struggle to do so, and how they arrived at their current situation.



JUDGE SENTENCES JUVENILE OFFENDERS TO HARD TIME IN LITERACY PROGRAMS

The illiteracy of our nation's youth may have serious implications that go beyond low reading scores; research shows a link between poor reading skills and juvenile criminal behavior. The San Diego County District Attorney's Office says that up to 85 percent of juvenile offenders have reading deficiencies and 84 percent of juvenile offenders re-enter the criminal justice system after their release. However, when juvenile offenders take part in quality reading instruction programs, recidivism rates drop by 20 percent or more.

Courts in two jurisdictions are trying to break the cycle of teen crime by using "reading interventions" as part of sentences for juvenile delinquents. Last week, Florida Circuit Judge Karen Cole, with the support of Mayor John Peyton and State Attorney Harry Shorstein, convened a group of officials to discuss implementing a reading program as part of sentencing for juvenile offenders.

The program will model a year-old initiative in San Diego, California, called the Juvenile Literacy Project. Three hundred students between the ages of 15 and 17 who are in custody at two county detention facilities are taught in small groups by reading specialists in an intensive eight-week literacy training course. A San Diego official told the *Florida Times-Union* that there have been significant increases on test scores, but that it's too early to evaluate the program's effect on recidivism.

Read the *Florida Times-Union* article at:

http://jacksonville.com/tu-online/stories/073103/met_13159809.shtml

Mark Your Calendars For:

September 29: *The American High School Crisis and State Policy Solutions*: Presented with the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, this day-long event cosponsored by the **National Center of Education and the Economy** and the **National Governors Association** brings together elected officials, leading educators, and outstanding scholars to explore strategies for leveraging high school reform on a large scale. More information is available at: <http://www.ncee.org/ncee/policyforums/index.jsp>

October 9: *Lights On Afterschool!*: A nationwide event that recognizes the critical importance of quality afterschool programs in the lives of children, their families, and their communities. The 4th annual *Lights on Afterschool!* celebration will rally community support for afterschool programs by shining the spotlight on innovative, high-quality afterschool programs. More information is available at: http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/loa_2003/index.cfm

Summer Break



During the month of August, the Alliance for Excellent Education will suspend its publication of *Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress*. The next issue will be dated September 15.

Until that time, have a happy and safe end of the summer.

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 non-profit 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.



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SAVE THE DATE:

The Alliance for Excellent Education will host its first annual Conference on American High School Policy:

November 16-18, 2003

The National Press Club • Washington, D.C.



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