



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



LITERACY, ADEQUACY, AND EQUITY: Alliance Hosts First Annual Invitational Conference on American High School Policy

Far too many of our nation's middle and high school students are in trouble. A quarter of them read considerably below grade level. Thirty percent of them drop out of school before graduation. More students are getting a diploma, but many remain unprepared for college or a career. Their teachers, particularly in high-needs schools, are often not trained in the subjects they teach; others enter the schools unprepared for the reality of teaching and leave the profession after only a few years. Few students get the personalized attention that is so critical to planning effectively for the future, and achieving success in the present.

Local, state, and federal fiscal constraints are adding to the problems. In an era of shrinking public revenues and increasing needs, funding for schools is contracting or holding level, and educational intervention programs that are designed to help at-risk young people—particularly at the high school level—are being cut back or eliminated.

On Nov. 17 and 18, the Alliance for Excellent Education held its first annual invitation conference on the American high school to discuss some of the most difficult challenges facing the nation's secondary schools: literacy, adequacy, and equity. The conference brought together congressional staff, key decision-makers from the administration, policymakers, and other leaders from the education community to think about ways to assure that every American child has the opportunity to graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills needed for a successful transition into college or a rewarding job.

The first day of the conference focused on the adolescent literacy challenge that confronts high schools and the role of the literacy coach in meeting this challenge. On the second day, participants examined the adequacy and equity debate surrounding education funding and the shared responsibility that local, state, and federal governments have in resolving funding differences between school districts.

The conference featured the release of four papers that delve deeper into these topics. This issue of *Straight A's* includes a brief summary of those four papers. A special section of the Alliance Web site, <http://www.all4ed.org/events/2003HSConference/index.html> on the Alliance conference will include the complete agenda, a transcript of the proceedings, and complete versions of all four reports and other materials distributed at the conference.



READING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY: Improving the Literacy of Children in Grades Four through 12

There are approximately 8.7 million fourth- through 12th-graders in America whose chances for academic success are dismal because they are unable to read and comprehend the material in their textbooks. National and international tests incontrovertibly prove that far too many of America's children are reading at levels that are unacceptably low. The 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exams showed that 25 percent of eighth-graders and 26 percent of 12th-graders were reading at "below basic" levels. The 2003 results were no better. Fourth-graders scored the same and eighth-grade scores actually decreased by one point from 2002. Twenty-six percent of eighth-grade students read below "basic".¹ International comparisons of reading performance placed American 11th-graders very close to the bottom, behind students from the Philippines, Indonesia, Brazil, and other developing nations.

A new Alliance report, *Adolescents and Literacy: Reading for the 21st Century*, examines the reliable, empirical research that exists on how to improve the literacy of children in grades four through 12. It offers policymakers and the public a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities that confront the nation as it begins to work to improve the literacy levels of older children. The report demonstrates that we already know a great deal about reading comprehension and about effective methods for helping students of all ages become better readers.

The report examines information related to teaching and learning strategies, the prevention of reading difficulties, the components of effective reading instruction, and reading comprehension. It also explores the importance and impact of a number of factors on literacy instruction including motivation, alphabetic principle, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (including prior knowledge and strategy instruction).

In addition, *Adolescents and Literacy* considers the developmental nature of reading and content learning, the differing needs of English-language learners, and the role that technology can play in helping students to better read and comprehend text. It also explores the importance of education and professional development for teachers to improve the reading ability of their students, and the infrastructure that currently exists in middle and high schools that encourages or discourages reading instruction.

Adolescents and Literacy is available online at: <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/reports.html>



THE LITERACY COACH: A Key to Improving Teaching and Learning in Secondary Schools

Never in this country's history has the need for an educated, literate citizenry been so critical. The increasing complexity of rapid globalization demands a workforce that is skilled in reading, communications, and mathematics. The ability to maintain a growing economy depends on the

¹ Approximately 343,000 students across the nation in grades four and eight participated in the NAEP 2003 reading assessment—12th-graders were not assessed in 2003. Results of the assessment were released on November 13, 2003 and will be featured in a future issue of *Straight A's*.

availability of educated, productive workers. A democratic society requires knowledgeable and involved citizens.

As the previous article points out, however, the nation has a problem. Far too many of its young people are struggling to read at a level that will allow them to excel in school and in their future workplaces. These students have little chance of succeeding in the demanding courses of high school without interventions that will considerably increase their ability to comprehend complex material, expand their vocabularies, and develop strong study skills.

Schools, school districts, and state educational agencies across the nation are developing programs to improve adolescent literacy in our middle schools and high schools. Many of these programs consider the literacy coach to be an integral part of their structure and success. Although more research and evaluation on the effectiveness of these programs is needed, early results and anecdotal evidence are encouraging and indicate positive achievement in the most important measure—increased student literacy levels. The Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that, to meet the needs of the close to 9 million fourth- through 12th-graders who read at “below basic” levels, approximately 10,000 literacy coaches will be needed.

To meet this national need for coaches over the next several years, multiple training pathways must be created. Among the models currently proving effective are college or university programs that offer training leading to a master’s degree or reading specialist certification; certification programs offered by states or accrediting agencies; and collaborations between school districts and colleges in which teachers receive preparation both in college classrooms and at field-based sites. A new Alliance report, *The Literacy Coach: A Key to Improving Teaching and Learning in Secondary Schools*, helps to develop an understanding of what works in successful programs as well as successful strategies for training effective literacy coaches.

The report acknowledges that a curriculum to support secondary learning and literacy cannot be a rigid, one-size-fits-all program. Teachers and teams of teachers must be able to make professional, informed decisions based on their own students’ needs and ability levels, in relation to curricular requirements and context. To do this, teachers must be guided and supported in a continuous learning process to develop effective ways to combine their teaching of literacy and content in the secondary school environment.

Successful programs recognize that effective, continuing, and supportive staff development—for teachers, administrators, and certain district-level personnel—is critical to success. Key players in the change process are literacy coaches—master teachers who provide essential leadership for the school’s overall literacy program. This leadership should include a long-term staff development program that supports the creation and implementation of the literacy program over months and years.

In successful literacy programs, literacy coaches work with content teachers across the curriculum to help them implement and utilize strategies designed to improve their students’ ability to read, write, and succeed in content courses. Coaches can also work directly with students who have particular difficulties in reading and comprehension.

The Literacy Coach: A Key to Improving Teaching and Learning in Secondary Schools

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Coaches may organize literacy teams that review assessment data and develop literacy goals for their schools, participate in conferences and professional development seminars, and bring information and ideas for curriculum revision back to their school colleagues. They then can conduct or facilitate in-service training for those colleagues. Because coaches are incorporated into the school's process for improvement and change, they can meet with teacher teams and individual teachers on an ongoing basis after training sessions are completed. They can also review student assessment data, guide lesson planning, and generally ensure that the strategies learned in workshops are effectively used in classroom instruction.

The report finds that the introduction of literacy coaches in schools and school districts has proven successful across the country—in specific, but limited programs. For the sake of the young people of our country who are most at risk of dropping out of high school or not going to college because of their limited reading and comprehension ability, and because their success or failure has such an impact on the nation's economic and social future, coaching strategies and successful literacy programs must be expanded into schools nationally.

The complete report is available online at: <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/reports.html>



INVESTING IN THE EDUCATION OF OLDER STUDENTS: A Summary of the Evidence

Investing in educational interventions that raise student achievement and attainment produces significant returns—for individuals and society. A new Alliance report, *Investing in the Education of Older Students: A Summary of the Evidence*, presents the conclusions of noted economists who looked at this question for the Alliance, as well as a compilation of additional research from other sources.

The economists studied the Alliance's Framework for an Excellent Education for all Middle School and High Schools Students that was released in *Every Child a Graduate*. The report lays out the Alliance's recommendations to Congress and the President for initiatives to improve the educational outcomes of America's 6 million middle and high school students who are at risk of failure. Four research-based initiatives defined in the report would, if effectively implemented, go a long way toward assuring that every secondary school student in the nation could graduate from high school with the skills necessary to succeed in college and life.

The Alliance estimates that the implementation of its recommendations on a national level would cost \$2,400 per student annually, in grades nine through 12. Policymakers, elected officials, educators, the media, and a concerned public naturally want to know whether such an investment would be worth the costs.

To evaluate the cost-effectiveness of its initiatives, the Alliance commissioned two economic studies. Using conservative projections, these studies indicate that the economic benefits produced by a new federal commitment to quality high school education, even if it achieved only modest outcomes, would be *at least 10 to 20 times greater than the investment cost*.

The assessment conducted by economists **Dan Goldhaber and Dan Player of the University of Washington** determined that if the new interventions succeeded in increasing the retention rate of potential dropouts by just one year, they would generate \$91,533 in discounted benefits and as much as \$205,533 in undiscounted benefits.

Lifetime Earnings and Non-wage Benefits of an Additional Year of School

	Return on Investment (Discounted)	Return on Investment (Undiscounted)
Wage benefits of an additional year of school	\$43,587	\$97,636
Nonwage benefits of an additional year of school	\$47,946	\$107,400
Total benefits of an additional year of school	\$91,533	\$205,533

Source: *Analytical Framework for Assessing the Potential Return on a Federal Investment in the Alliance for Excellent Education's Every Child a Graduate* (Goldhaber and Player)

A second study, *Public and Private Benefits of Education for At-Risk Youth and the Alliance for Excellent Education Framework*, by **Duncan Chaplin of the Urban Institute**, suggests a smaller yield in discounted benefits of between \$21,936 and \$76,850. Both studies indicate, however, that federal adoption of the four-part Framework for an Excellent Education, if it is successful in meeting its goals, would produce—at the very least—an average return on investment of more than 100 percent. These studies show that investing at the federal level in effective high school programs is not just the right thing to do, it is a sound investment that will yield direct benefits for individual students, their communities, and the economy as a whole.

The Goldhaber/Player and Chaplin papers mainly focus on the private benefits—the direct benefits to the student—of investing in the Alliance’s Framework. However, *Investing in the Education of Older Students: A Summary of the Evidence* also reviews outside research that examines the additional societal benefits of investing in education. Although these studies are not comprehensive and do not provide quantification in the same manner as the reports that the Alliance commissioned, they do provide anecdotal evidence that supports the conclusion that the benefits outweigh the costs.

The Alliance report finds that the nation is failing to invest strategically and comprehensively in programs that guarantee quality education for low-performing middle and high school students. Without this support, many of these students drop out and find themselves without a high school diploma and unprepared for a successful career, creating huge costs for individual citizens, their communities, and the American economy.

However, if every child graduates, all students will have access to good jobs and good salaries. Cities and states will receive tax revenue from higher earnings, and companies and organizations can gain access to employees with the knowledge and skills required to compete effectively in the 21st century workplace. By investing in the untapped potential of low-performing secondary school students, we will provide them with opportunities to succeed and create societal benefits that will last for generations to come.

All three reports can be found at: <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/reports.html>



NEEDS IMPROVEMENT: Progress Report on American High Schools

After years of neglect, our nation's high schools are gaining notice from policymakers, grant makers, the media, and a concerned public. A number of factors have combined to help focus attention on the millions of secondary school students who are at risk of not graduating from high school, or of graduating unprepared for college and a rewarding career. The corporate world needs a better-educated workforce. There is growing demand from the armed services for recruits with the skills and knowledge that are needed to serve effectively in an increasingly technology-oriented military. Publicity about our unacceptably high national dropout rates is causing a furor across the country in communities, which are trying to attract new businesses and residents. Private foundations such as the **Gates Foundation** and the **Carnegie Corporation of New York** are providing funds to school districts across the country to create new models of effective high schools.

It has been nearly two years since President Bush signed the *No Child Left Behind Act* into law. With the goal of holding schools and states accountable for the achievement of all students, *NCLB* requires various reports to be regularly issued, for at least the next 10 years, to make important information available to parents, policymakers, and the community.

In *Left Out and Left Behind: NCLB and the American High School*, the Alliance provided information about the *NCLB* mandates particular to high schools, and included the first release of nationwide and state-by-state numbers of schools which have been determined to be "in need of improvement." It also compiled state and city graduation rates. The latest Alliance report, *Progress Report on American High Schools 2003-04*, builds on this effort and provides information on all 50 states, including how well they are performing when it comes to educating middle and high school students. The report serves as a compilation of available high school data including statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics and the National Assessment of Educational Progress, policy institutes such as the Manhattan Institute, The Education Trust, and the Urban Institute, among others.

The report also includes original work on the number of high schools in need of improvement and the number that are at the 75 percent poverty level, as well as an examination of state plans and how they deal with high schools. Using information from the approved state plans and the expertise of individuals at state departments of education, the report also includes summaries of the accountability plans for all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Although the law requires that the list of schools must be available to the public before the beginning of the school year, the data have thus far been incomplete, unclear, and hard to find, making it difficult for parents, the community, and the media to correctly interpret the information they are receiving. The report attempts to summarize this information in an easy-to-understand format.

Progress Report on American High Schools 2003-04 can be found at:
<http://www.all4ed.org/publications/reports.html>



STATE FUNDING GAPS: New Education Trust Report Finds Large Funding Gaps Between High- and Low-Poverty School Districts

According to a new report by the **Education Trust**, large funding gaps continue to exist between high-income and low-income and minority districts in many states. The report, *The Funding Gap*, found that in most states the school districts that educate the greatest number of low-income and minority students typically receive substantially less state and local money per student than districts with the fewest low-income and minority students.

The report found that some progress has been made, but much more work needs to be done in closing the funding gap. While 34 of 49 states have closed the gap to some degree, 28 states still provide fewer state and local education dollars per student than districts enrolling the lowest percentages of minority students. The numbers do not take into account the additional costs typically associated with educating low-income students. When making slight adjustments for this cost, the number grows to 30 states, with seven states possessing a per-student funding gap of over \$1,000. Nationally, from 1997 to 2001, the per-student funding gap between the quarter of districts educating the greatest number of poor students and the quarter of districts educating the fewest poor students narrowed slightly, from \$1,139 to \$1,020.

Kati Haycock, Director of the Education Trust, stressed the partnership that needs to exist between states and the federal government when it comes to educating all students. “Let’s be clear,” she said. “Congress and the President need to do their part by fully funding *No Child Left Behind*. But states are primarily responsible for education funding, and they have to do their part too. In an era of high standards for *all* students, not just some, directing *fewer* state and local dollars to districts with the greatest need is simply unconscionable.”

The report offers recommendations to help states narrow this funding gap. These recommendations include reducing reliance on local property taxes by reworking the state funding system, and providing additional targeted funding for high-poverty districts. “Every state provides some state resources to K-12 education, and most states provide some additional funding to high-poverty districts,” said **Kevin Carey, Senior Policy Analyst** and author of the report. “The problem is that many don’t do enough to make up for what can often be huge resource differences between poor and wealthy communities,” he concluded.

The complete report is available from the Education Trust at: <http://www.edtrust.org>

Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events both 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. The Alliance for Excellent Education is a nonprofit organization working to make it possible for America’s six 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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First Class Mail
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Woodbridge, VA

Volume 3 No. 20: November 19, 2003

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