



# Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION HOLDS HIGH SCHOOL SUMMIT: Diploma Should Be a “Road Map to a Prosperous, Purposeful Future,” Says Secretary Paige**

On December 2–3, the U.S. Department of Education held its second annual National High School Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C. The conference was billed as a “next step” for coordinating and strengthening the high school improvement efforts that are encouraged by the No Child Left Behind Act. The conference brought state and local leaders together to think about high school reform and ways to improve graduation rates. It also provided them with an opportunity to share information on a peer-to-peer basis with educators, policymakers, and business and education leaders, and to learn about high school reform efforts from content experts and Department of Education officials.

In her welcoming address and introduction of **U.S. Secretary Rod Paige, Susan Sclafani, assistant secretary for the Office of Vocational and Adult Education at the U.S. Department of Education**, stressed that far too many students were leaving high school without a diploma and that many others were graduating without the tools they needed to enter and succeed in college. She said that high schools need to help students become effective citizens who can perform at high levels regardless of whether they enter college or other postsecondary education or go directly into the workforce.

Secretary Paige told the audience not to accept high schools as “second best” just because that’s the way it has always been. He challenged attendees to lead by example and to do their part to find and share what works in reforming high schools. “Our purpose is to help states realize their *own* vision of long-term excellence in high schools—schools that successfully educate all students,” he said. “What’s more, provide a springboard for even greater success in college and the workplace.”

In regard to the role that the federal government could possibly play in high school reform, Paige discussed expanding the No Child Left Behind Act to provide a “framework” for state-designed plans. “We want to see high school students benefit from the same high expectations and accountability for results we’ve introduced in earlier grades,” he said. “And we want states to foster world-quality teaching, rigorous coursework, and creative, innovative structures so high school students remain engaged, excited, and—most of all—enrolled. At the end of the day, we want our high schools to be more than way stations. A diploma should be more than a glorified certificate of attendance. It should be a road map to a prosperous, purposeful future.”

Paige also talked about the economic impact of failing to properly prepare and graduate high school students—both for the individual and for society as a whole. “The lack of preparation

## U.S. Department of Education Holds High School Summit

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sends ripples throughout society . . . It's a domino effect—and it's very costly: billions upon billions of dollars a year, not to mention the lives interrupted. It's simply not fair to young men and women to put them in this kind of position.”

The department plans to create a proceedings page on its website that will cover the entire conference, including both general sessions and breakouts. Each state represented at the conference will create a “one-pager” that will be posted on the department’s high school site, <http://www.ed.gov/highschool>. The date for these postings has not been announced.

In the meantime, Secretary Paige’s complete speech is available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/2004/12/12022004.html>.

### President Bush Signs “Ominous” Spending Bill

Given the smallest budget increase in nearly a decade for the U.S. Department of Education (1.6 percent) and the bleak outlook for additional funding in fiscal 2006, many observers have given the fiscal 2005 spending bill a nickname: the “ominous” bill. Whatever it is called, the \$388 billion fiscal year 2005 omnibus spending bill was signed into law by President Bush on December 8, after members of the U.S. House of Representatives returned to Capitol Hill to delete a controversial IRS provision from the bill on December 6.

This issue of *Straight A's* contains a special insert that outlines the spending totals for education programs that have an impact on middle and high school students and schools.



### MEASURING GRADUATION TO MEASURE SUCCESS: Alliance Policy Brief Focuses on Graduation Rate Calculation

A new Alliance for Excellent Education policy brief urges specific policy changes at the federal level to ensure that states accurately report high school graduation rates. *Measuring Graduation to Measure Success* was released at a December 9, standing-room-only symposium hosted by the Alliance. At the event, experts from the research community argued that accurate, reliable data about how the number of the nation’s children are not completing high school—and information about who these children are—are critical. Without it, they said, policymakers and school administrators are unable to effectively assess school quality, determine school progress, and propose reforms to improve outcomes.

Currently, most states calculate graduation rates using the same method as the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which researchers say results in graduation rates that are unreliable and misleading. For example, while NCES found a national high school completion rate of 86 percent for the class of 1998, calculation methods developed by **Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute** and **Christopher Swanson of the Urban Institute**, who was a panelist at the Alliance’s symposium, put the national graduation rate in the 68–70 percent range, a difference of more than 15 percent.

To remedy this discrepancy, the Alliance proposes three policy changes, which are outlined in the brief. First, the U.S. Department of Education should enforce current NCLB requirements for calculating graduation rates and set explicit national rules for state formulas. Already, NCLB

provides rigorous definitions for graduation rate calculations; for the most part, the problem lies in the way the law has been implemented. The brief suggests that the U.S. Department of Education begin aggressively enforcing graduation rate provisions in the law to reflect the intent of Congress.

Second, Congress should modify NCLB so that disaggregated graduation data carry consequences, such as those for Adequate Yearly Progress. Currently, NCLB holds states accountable if subgroups of student populations in schools and districts do not regularly improve their achievement levels as a measure of AYP, but this is not true for graduation rates. At the Alliance's symposium, the **Urban Institute's Duncan Chaplin** suggested that this disconnect of accountability for test scores but not graduation rates was akin to a hospital keeping statistics on the patients it treats who survive while ignoring data on those who die.

Finally, the federal government needs to provide additional funding for data collection and technical assistance to state departments of education and local school districts. Presently, state and local officials lack the technology, infrastructure, and expertise necessary to appropriately institute the reforms required by NCLB. In the 2005 omnibus spending bill, Congress allocated \$25 million in new funding for states to build data systems. This funding is a crucial first step toward helping states get the systems they need.

As the policy brief explains, it is impossible to assess the progress being made by the nation's high school students without valid, state-by-state calculations of high school graduation rates. Noting that a careful analysis of high school graduation patterns can provide essential insight into the performance of the public education system and should be a critical component in the development of future education policy, it concludes that the federal government must play a leadership role in ensuring that these data are available, consistent across the nation, and accurate.

However, symposium participants repeatedly pointed out that enough data already exist to prove that the country is in a crisis when it comes to graduation rates. **Doug Mesecar of the U.S. Department of Education** stressed that too many kids are dropping out of high school, even if we do not know whether they represent 10 percent, 25 percent, or 50 percent of students in a given area. He said that meaningful high school reform is overdue and that more conversations need to be held on why kids are dropping out and what can be done to prevent it.

Other panelists included **Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins University**, **Greg Forster of the Manhattan Institute**, **Daniel Losen of the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University**, **Moirá Lenehan of the Office of Congressman Ruben Hinojosa (D)**, and **Robert Lerner of the National Center for Education Statistics**. **Scott Palmer of Holland and Knight LLP** served as the moderator.

The policy brief, *Measuring Graduation to Measure Success*, as well as the agenda and supporting documents from the graduation rate symposium, are available on the Alliance website at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/MeasuringGraduationToMeasureSuccess.html>. During the week of December 13, an audio recording from the symposium and a short write-up of the symposium will also be available on the website.

### **On the Bookshelf: *Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis***

In *Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis*, **Gary Orfield, director of the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University**, has edited a collection of essays that reveal the scope of the hidden dropout crisis in America. The book reviews the most recent and accurate data on graduation and dropout rates and explores the reasons that young people drop out of school. It also presents the most promising models for helping high school students graduate with their peers.

“There is a high school dropout crisis far beyond the imagination of most Americans, concentrated in urban schools and relegating many thousands of minority children to a life of failure. We urgently need to address this problem as a nation,” Orfield says. “Our goal in this book is to make the public aware of this issue and make improving high school graduation rates a central part of national education reform. We believe the first step must entail highlighting the severe racial disparities in high school graduation rates that exist at the school and district levels.”

More information on the book, as well as ordering information, is available at <http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~hepg/dropoutsinamerica.html>.



### **TASK FORCE ON GRADUATION, COMPLETION, AND DROPOUT INDICATORS ISSUES FINAL REPORT**

Late last year, U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige announced the creation of a special task force on high school dropout and graduation rates. He charged it with reviewing the methods for reporting high school dropouts and on-time graduates and making recommendations on ways to improve both indicators.

“There is no question that we must focus our efforts on helping students graduate from high school,” Paige said in December 2003. “One of the first things we need to do is look at the varying definitions, standards, and tracking systems throughout the country to gain a better understanding of the problem so that we can tackle it head-on.”

On November 30, 2004, the task force issued its final report. Included in it are mathematical equations the task force recommends for calculating on-time graduation rates, completion rates, transfer rates, and dropout rates. According to the report, these rates require data that follow individual students throughout their high school careers (so-called cohort data), but it also offers alternatives for states that currently do not have that capacity.

The report described a number of recent developments that have “raised the scientific urgency of having sound, defensible, well-understood indicators” for measuring high school graduation, including:

- the No Child Left Behind Act and the use of graduation, completion, and dropout indicators for public school accountability purposes;
- increased diversity in student bodies and the need to measure the progress of student subgroups; and
- growing multiplicity of means for completion of high school (GEDs, home schooling, etc.).

## The Exclusion-Adjusted Cohort Graduation Indicator (EACGI)

The task force's preferred graduation indicator is called the "exclusion-adjusted cohort graduation indicator" (EACGI). The EACGI (see formula in box below) can be calculated in the same manner at all levels, from the school to the nation. It provides for the inclusion of in-transfers and is based on data anticipated to be available in all states within three to five years.

The task force urged the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to move toward using the EACGI in its own reports and studies and encouraged states to do the same, especially when reporting high school graduation information for the No Child Left Behind Act. It also recommended that, while NCLB does not mandate uniform reporting of graduation data, the U.S. Department of Education should begin to do so and that it should work with states to ensure that the required data are available and of high quality.

The report noted that some states have the capacity to employ the preferred graduation indicator now, but others do not. For the states that lack the necessary data, the task force recommended several alternative indicators that require less data and could be used as a substitute for the time being. But these options have what the task force called "manifest shortcomings," such as no capability to document exclusions like transfers or imprisonment.

Acknowledging that no single indicator of graduation, completion, or dropouts can serve all purposes, the report urges states to examine patterns between indicators that could illuminate problems in ways that a single indicator could not. For example, a school with a high graduation indicator and a high transfer rate could help identify a school that is "dumping" students who are perceived as unlikely to graduate.

The complete NCES report, *National Institute of Statistical Science/Education Statistics Services Institute Task Force on Graduation, Completion, and Dropout Indicators*, is available at <http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2005105>.

### The Exclusion-Adjusted Cohort Graduation Indicator: A Mathematical Representation

The exclusion-adjusted cohort graduation indicator (EACGI) is a function of school  $S$ , cohort year  $Y_c$ , and graduation year  $Y_g$ . It accounts for in-transfers, out-transfers, retentions, and other exclusions. The mathematical representation is:

$$\text{EACGI}_{(S, Y_c, Y_g)} = \frac{\begin{aligned} &\text{Students entering 9th grade for the first time in } Y_c \text{ and graduating by } Y_g \\ &+ \text{Students transferring into 10th grade in } Y_c + 1 \text{ and graduating by } Y_g \\ &+ \text{Students transferring into 11th grade in } Y_c + 2 \text{ and graduating by } Y_g \\ &+ \text{Students transferring into 12th grade in } Y_c + 3 \text{ and graduating by } Y_g \end{aligned}}{\begin{aligned} &(\text{Students entering 9th grade for the first time in } Y_c) - (\text{those excluded in } Y_c, \dots, Y_g) \\ &+ (\text{Students transferring into 10th grade in } Y_c + 1) - (\text{those excluded in } Y_c + 1, \dots, Y_g) \\ &+ (\text{Students transferring into 11th grade in } Y_c + 2) - (\text{those excluded in } Y_c + 2, \dots, Y_g) \\ &+ (\text{Students transferring into 12th grade in } Y_c + 3) - (\text{those excluded in } Y_c + 3, \dots, Y_g) \end{aligned}}.$$



## AMERICAN FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLDS CONTINUE TO LAG BEHIND INTERNATIONAL PEERS: U.S. Students Perform Below Average in Math and Science, Score at Average in Reading

Fifteen-year-old students in the United States performed below their international peers in mathematics literacy and science literacy, according results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). In reading literacy, America's fifteen-year-olds performed at the international average, but their average score dropped on the 2003 assessment.

U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige said the results point to the need for reform of the nation's high schools. "The PISA results are a blinking warning light," he said. "It's more evidence that high standards and accountability for results are a good idea for all schools at all grade levels . . . Many of our high schools are already world-class. However, too many graduates are ill-prepared to succeed in higher education or the workforce."

PISA, first implemented in 2000 and given every three years, is a system of international assessments that measure fifteen-year-olds' capabilities in reading literacy, mathematics literacy, and science literacy.<sup>1</sup> While each is studied every three years, one area receives greater attention, involving more items and more detailed results. In 2000, reading literacy was the "major domain"; in 2003, mathematics literacy was the major domain. In 2006, the focus will be on science literacy. PISA is sponsored by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), an intergovernmental organization of thirty industrialized nations.<sup>2</sup> In 2003, these thirty countries, along with eleven other non-OECD countries,<sup>3</sup> participated in PISA.

In mathematics literacy, American students scored an average of 483, which placed them below the OECD average score of 500, and also below 23 other OECD countries and 3 non-OECD countries. U.S. students also had lower scores than the OECD averages in each of the four math content-area subgroups: space and shape (similar to geometry); change and relationships (similar to algebra); quantity; and uncertainty.

In addition to scores, PISA uses proficiency levels to measure student performance. In mathematics literacy, there are six levels, with six being the highest. The U.S. average score of 483 is at the bottom range of level 3. On average, even the highest-achieving American students (those in the top 10 percent) were outscored by their international peers. As the chart on page 7 shows, the percentages of American students at levels 4, 5, and 6 are all smaller than the OECD average. At the same time, the United States has larger percentages of students at levels 2 and below:

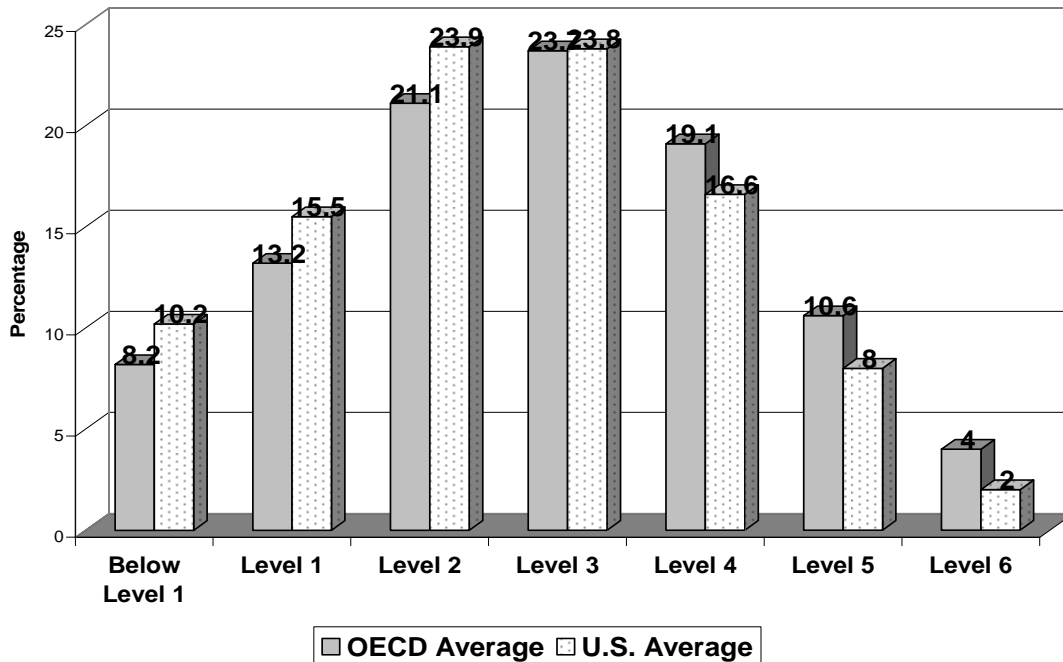
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<sup>1</sup> According to **Robert Lerner, commissioner of NCES**, PISA's use of the term "literacy" with each of the three subject areas is meant to reflect PISA's emphasis on applied knowledge and skills in a real-life context, not to report on how well students have mastered a particular curriculum or specific facts or formulas.

<sup>2</sup> Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, and the United States.

<sup>3</sup> Brazil, Hong Kong–China, Indonesia, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Macao-China, Russian Federation, Serbia and Montenegro, Thailand, Tunisia, and Uruguay.

### Highest U.S. Achievers Outperformed by OECD Counterparts



In reading literacy, the average U.S. score was 495, not measurably different from the OECD average of 494 but still below the scores of 16 other countries. In the 2000 assessment, the U.S. average was 504.4. In science literacy, the average U.S. score was 491, lower than the OECD average of 500 and below 21 other countries. In the 2000 assessment, the U.S. average was 499.5.

The complete report, *International Outcomes of Learning in Mathematics Literacy and Problem Solving: PISA 2003 Results from the U.S. Perspective*, is available at <http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2005003>.



### Happy Holidays from the Alliance for Excellent Education!

The Alliance for Excellent Education wishes you and yours a happy holiday season and a wonderful 2005!

This issue marks the last one before the Alliance newsletter—although not the Alliance staff—settles in for a long winter’s nap. The next issue of *Straight A’s* will be dated January 17, 2005.

**Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress** 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 secondary school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.



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