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Public Education Policy And Progress



IT'S EDUCATION, STUPID: Greenspan Stresses the Importance of Education to Improving Job Prospects, Incomes, and Living Standards

In a recent speech to the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, **Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan** warned that U.S. workers must be better educated if they are to find jobs in a rapidly changing economy. He said we must provide “rigorous education and ongoing training to all members of our society,” and went on to note that better education in elementary, middle, and high schools was needed to increase the wages of lower-skilled workers and to diminish growing income inequality.

According to the **U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)**, of the 21.3 million jobs expected to be created between 2002 and 2012, “professional and related occupations and service occupations are projected to increase the fastest and to add the most jobs, accounting for more than half of total job growth.” Six out of ten of the fastest growing occupations will require an associate’s degree or higher.

“Professional and related occupations” require high levels of educational attainment and are generally well paid. Most “service occupations,” which represent the second largest growing segment of the job market, require a high school degree and at least some on-the-job training. The third of the nation’s students who are not currently graduating from high school will not only be unable to compete for jobs as computer software engineers, physician’s assistants, or medical records technicians, but will also have difficulty qualifying to become home health aides, retail sales clerks, or cashiers.

Jobs in the manufacturing sector, a traditional employment route for lower-skilled workers, are expected to decline by 1 percent over the next decade. The jobs that will be available will require higher skill levels than in the past. A 2001 report by the **National Association of Manufacturers** points out that, already, “the most severe skills shortages now are mainly in the production workforce. These skilled hourly workers have traditionally been the backbone of manufacturing. Moreover, the major skills [that hourly workers lack, include] reading, communication, and math skills.”

Greenspan noted that “In the 1920s and 1930s, high school enrollment in this country expanded rapidly. . . . In the context of the demands of the economy at that time, a high school diploma represented the training needed to be successful in most aspects of American enterprise.” Now, to meet technological advances that require workers to have higher skill levels, he said “our secondary school system needs to serve the requirements of a changing economy in the same way.”

It's Education, Stupid

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Whether or not students choose to pursue postsecondary education, they will be far more competitive as job applicants if they graduate with high school diplomas that demonstrate basic levels of knowledge and skill in English and mathematics. For, as Greenspan pointed out, “Generic capabilities in mathematics, writing, and verbal skills are key to the ability to learn and to apply new skills and thus to earn higher wages over time.”



LOSING OUR FUTURE: New Report Finds Minority Students Face Fifty–Fifty Odds of Graduating from High School

Half or more of the nation’s minority students are failing to graduate from high school, according to a new report from the **Harvard Civil Rights Project, the Urban Institute, the Civil Society Institute’s Results for America Project, and Advocates for Children of New York**. The report, *Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth Are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis*, found that while only 75 percent of white students graduate on time, the graduation rates for minority students are much lower.

As seen in the chart below, the national “graduation rate gap” (defined by the report as the difference in graduation rates between whites and minorities) for blacks is 25 percent, 22 percent for Hispanics, and 24 percent for Native Americans. In some states it is far worse; in New York, for instance, the gap is over 40 percent for both black and Hispanic students. “Despite wide ranges in some states, nearly every state shows a large and negative gap between whites and at least one minority group,” the report says.

National Graduation Rates by Race

Race/Ethnicity	Graduation Rate
Asian/Pacific Islander	76.8
White	74.9
Hispanic	53.2
Native American	51.1
Black	50.2

All Students 68.0

Source: Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth Are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis

The states with the worst black and Hispanic minority graduation rates are New York (35.1 percent black, 31.9 percent Hispanic), Wisconsin (41.1 percent, 54.4 percent), and Pennsylvania (45.9 percent, 40.9 percent).

“The dropout data in use today misleads the public into thinking that most students are earning diplomas. The reality is that there is little, or no, state or federal oversight of dropout and graduation rate reports for accuracy,” said **Urban Institute Research Associate Dr. Christopher Swanson**. “Incredibly, some states report a 5 percent dropout rate for African

Americans, when, in reality, only half of their young adult African Americans are graduating with diplomas.”

The two most commonly used ways to measure graduation rates—the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) formula and the Census Bureau Current Population Survey (CPS) data—produce results that often dramatically underestimate the number of students who drop out. As an alternative, Dr. Swanson created the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI), which “statistically examines changes in enrollment and the likelihood of graduating with a high school diploma by combining the average success of groups of students moving from ninth grade to tenth grade, from tenth grade to junior year, from junior year to senior year, and from senior year to graduation, at the district and state level.” Essentially, the CPI helps determine which groups experience the greatest difficulty graduating from high school and whether progress in improving high school completion rates is being achieved.

The report recommends that states use a more accurate system to report graduation rates. For example, thirty states currently use the NCES method. The report also recommends that states set reasonable graduation floors, require significant progress toward meeting these floors, and extend graduation rate accountability benchmarks to students subgrouped by ethnicity. Currently, only four states (Colorado, Illinois, North Dakota, and Oregon) have implemented graduation rate accountability plans that both include a floor and require disaggregation of data by race. However, three of these four (Illinois, North Dakota, and Oregon) use NCES accounting methods that tend to inaccurately represent true graduation rates.

The complete report, including state profiles, graduation rates for all fifty states disaggregated by ethnicity, and the graduation rates for the one hundred largest school districts is available at <http://www.resultsforamerica.org/>.

The *Losing Our Future* report draws on a companion report from the Urban Institute entitled *Who Graduates? Who Doesn't?: A Statistical Profile of Public High School Graduation, Class of 2001*, which is available at <http://www.urban.org/urlprint.cfm?ID=8742>.



FLORIDIANS REAFFIRM SUPPORT FOR CLASS-SIZE AMENDMENT

In November 2002, Florida voters passed a constitutional amendment that caps class size at eighteen students per classroom in grades K–3, twenty-two students in grades 4–8, and twenty-five students in grades 9–12. Since then, **Florida Governor Jeb Bush (R)** and other leading Republicans in the state legislature have criticized the amendment and cited its huge potential costs.

Many legislators have vowed to try to repeal the amendment. However, a recent poll by the *Florida Times-Union* and the *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel* found that the amendment enjoys continued support from Florida voters. Of the six hundred registered voters polled, 43 percent said they wanted the amendment to stay as it is, and an additional 14 percent would favor a revision that would limit class caps only in kindergarten through third grade. Only 29 percent favored a complete repeal of the amendment.

Floridians Reaffirm Support for Class-Size Amendment

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Perhaps as a result of the poll, momentum to repeal appeared to slow when Governor Bush failed to mention the issue in his State of the State Address last week. In a speech largely devoted to education, Bush discussed his plan to put professional reading coaches in half of Florida's middle schools and to implement other education initiatives, but shied away from talking about the class-size amendment. After the address, Bush sounded a little more resigned to accepting the law—at least for the time being. “There's very little I can do,” he told the *Associated Press*. The state legislature appears to be of the same opinion as the governor. “We may have to wait a couple more years for the effects, the fiscal effects, to become more apparent,” said **House Speaker Johnnie Byrd (R)**.



LAYING DOWN THE LAW: Colorado Literacy Program Benefits Struggling Students

Last week, thousands of schoolchildren celebrated the one hundredth birthday of Theodor Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss. In Colorado, students also celebrated the sixth anniversary of the Colorado Basic Literacy Act, a law to ensure that every student is reading at grade level.

First implemented in fall 1998, the law was sponsored by **State Senator Norma Anderson (R)** and former **Senator Al Meiklejohn (R)**. “We had a lot of conversations about the problems of, No. 1, businesses still having kids who don't know how to read or do math, and No. 2, the high cost of remediation at the college level,” Anderson told the *Rocky Mountain News*. “Al Meiklejohn kept saying [students] need to learn how to read by third grade and I said, ‘Al, why don't we do a bill?’”

The law requires schools to assess the reading ability of students in grades K–3. Students who test below grade level are assigned an individual literacy plan (ILP), developed in cooperation with the student's teacher and parents. The plan then follows the student from grade to grade until tests show that reading levels have improved. As part of the plan, students in the program benefit from small class sizes (fourteen students between two teachers), an at-home reading plan, and summer school.

During the first year of the program, more than forty thousand students in grades K–3 were placed on ILPs. By the time those same students were in the seventh grade, only 5,544 students remained on an ILP, meaning that more than 86 percent were considered to be reading at grade level and had tested out of the program. Next year, this initial class of ILP students will be entering high school. Preparations are already underway to accommodate students who still need additional reading help.

The complete article, which includes a detailed look at the Colorado Basic Literacy Act's impact within Drake Middle School in Arvada, is available at http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/education/article/0,1299,DRMN_957_2693556,00.html.

National Institutes in Reading Apprenticeship Now Accepting Applications for Summer Workshop

The Strategic Literacy Initiative (SLI) is now accepting applications for the 2004 National Institutes in Reading Apprenticeship (NIRA). NIRA is a week-long intensive experience for teams of middle and high school teacher leaders and administrators who are ready to assume leadership roles in their school or district for improving content-area reading. Previous participants from across the country continue to report impressive changes in teacher practice and resulting improvements in student academic literacy. SLI's research shows students in Reading Apprenticeship classrooms becoming more confident, effective, and strategic readers.

At each summer institute, up to forty participants in teams from around the United States will gather in Oakland, California, and in Baltimore, Maryland, to learn the key ideas and strategies of Reading Apprenticeship.

To learn more about the Strategic Literacy Initiative and the National Institutes in Reading Apprenticeship, please visit <http://www.wested.org/stratlit/>.



SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES PAY OFF IN HOUSTON: Greater Personal Attention Leads to a Student's Success

A recent article by Allan Turner in the *Houston Chronicle* tells the often turbulent, but ultimately inspiring story of **Justin Pineset, a Lee High School student** who overcame gangs, drugs, and life on the streets to become president of his senior class and a member of the Houston school district's student advisory committee. According to Turner, Pineset's story is a tribute to the small learning communities program of the Houston Independent School District (HISD), which "provides students with adult advocates and personalizes instruction in small classroom settings."

When a student stops coming to school, his adult advocates from the program step in and provide continuing support. Two months ago, Pineset became homeless and stopped coming to school. That is when Mary Kennedy, an English teacher and Pineset's adult advocate, Jonathan Davis, the school's basketball coach, Associate Principal Mary Stevens, and others convinced Pineset to return to high school. "I kind of understood that I was letting people down," he said. "I recognized that I had come too far to stop. I came back to school."

More recently, Pineset was featured as a speaker at HISD's "state of the schools" session. He spoke in front of eighteen hundred community leaders and stressed how education "can make a difference in students' lives." After his speech, representatives from several area institutions made a point of shaking his hand and giving him their business cards.

Pineset now sees himself as a "regular teen," but also as a mentor to other students. "The way I see myself is helping other students, trying to keep them away from the negative. I do have some rough associates. I tell them I know you're struggling, but you can make it just like myself."

Read the complete article at <http://www.chron.com/cs/CDA/ssistory.mpl/front/2424475>.



NEW YORK CITY TO ELIMINATE MOST MIDDLE SCHOOLS

In an effort to give students more personal attention and implement new strategies to improve schooling for young adolescents, New York City education officials plan to eliminate as many as two-thirds of the city's 218 middle schools and replace them with K–8 grammar schools or new high schools covering sixth through twelfth grade.

As reported by the *New York Times*, **Michele Cahill, senior counselor for educational policy to Schools Chancellor Joel Klein**, said the school reconfigurations were only one aspect of a wider effort that would include changes to curriculum, the organization of the school day, and student support services. Although as many as three dozen of the new schools will be in place at the beginning of the next school year, others will wait for new construction. “We are developing a multiyear comprehensive plan,” Cahill said. “We are looking . . . to have more configurations that we think will improve continuity and improve student-teacher connectedness.”

In Queens, regional superintendent Kathleen Cashin has already won approval for a plan that would reconfigure five elementary schools and two middle schools into grammar schools for pre-K–8 classes next fall. The plan also calls for a middle school that will house gifted students in grades six through eight.

“It’s an elementary-like nurturing environment,” she told the *New York Times*. “Because children are older doesn’t mean they don’t need that nurturing care of a loving, caring adult. I have found attendance is better, almost always. The violence is less, the younger kids defuse the older and the academics are at least as good if not better.”

According to the *Times* article, the city “faces several difficulties in trying to reconfigure schools, including the physical limitations of existing buildings.” The Education Department has proposed spending \$13 billion over the next five years to build up to fifty-four new K–8 schools and up to twenty-three 6–12 schools. Other difficulties could come from critics who say that eleven-year-old students should not be in the same building as eighteen-year-old high school students. Proponents, meanwhile, argue that the 6–12 model offers a clearer path to college.

Read the complete article at <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/03/education/03SCHO.html>.



BROOKLYN HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS FED UP WITH SOCIAL PROMOTION

In a letter to New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein, one-half of the 120-member faculty at Clara Barton High School said they were tired of trying to educate unprepared and illiterate students, and called for an end to social promotion. Faced with what the letter called an “impossible mission,” teachers are left largely on the sidelines as teens struggle to pass the state Regents exams required to earn a diploma. Ultimately, many of these students drop out.

“Come into our classrooms and we can show you the results of social promotion: 16-year-old students who write incoherently, misspelling the most basic words, who don’t know

multiplication tables, and who struggle to comprehend a passage in a basic textbook,” the letter read.

Klein released the letter from Clara Barton teachers in defense of **New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg**’s decision to hold back third graders who flunk standardized English and math exams.

At Clara Barton—where the focus is on health careers—about 72 percent of its students graduate in four years. “We don’t want to do a disservice to students,” **Clara Barton nursing teacher Marcy Licardi** told the *New York Post*. “They can’t survive high school if they can’t read and write. It is a political ploy to call students fourth graders if they haven’t met the requirements.”

Read the complete article at <http://www.nypost.com/news/regionalnews/19728.htm>.

On the Bookshelf: *Letters to the Next President*

A collection of letters addressed to the next president of the United States charges that current federal efforts to improve public education suffer from restrictive notions of accountability, misguided tests, inadequate funding, and inflexibility in helping students demonstrate achievement and reach their potential. The collection, published as *Letters to the Next President: What We Can Do About the Real Crisis in Public Education*, was issued by the Teachers College Press and includes submissions from Bill Cosby, Senators John Glenn and Jim Jeffords, the late Paul Wellstone, and parents, students, and educators from across the country.

“This is a book about how we can sweep up all of this mess and get back to what education comes down to: caring, intelligent, trustworthy, and knowledgeable adults who will ensure that every student can learn,” writes Bill Cosby in the prologue. According to the press release, the book presents “what 46 citizens spanning all age groups believe the President should do and citizens should know when it comes to school improvement.” The authors call on the next president to gather the energy of local citizens and educators to reenter the public schools.

“We ask the next president . . . to expand the definition of achievement . . . and make an explicit commitment to the civic purpose of education,” writes Senator Glenn, in his letter on “The Civic Mission of Schools.”

All royalties from the book are being donated to organizations serving children and youth.

More information on the book is available at <http://www.letterstoprez.com/>.

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 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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