



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



GRADUATION FOR ALL, A RIGHT AND A RESPONSIBILITY: National Campaign to Focus on Increasing High School Graduation Rates

According to a Manhattan Institute report, the national graduation rate for the class of 2001 was 70 percent, with only 51 percent of African Americans and 52 percent of Latino students receiving high school diplomas. To combat these low numbers, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, the National Hispanic Council of State Legislatures, the United State Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (USHCC), and the USHCC Foundation launched “Graduation for All: A Right and a Responsibility,” a national campaign to call attention to the students who have disappeared from school roll calls across the country, and to insist on improvement in high school graduation rates.

“The time is right to demand improvements in high school graduation rates. We must ensure that our young people have their moment and that their families can proudly send their newly minted graduates off to a bright future—our future,” said **Rep. Rubén Hinojosa (D-TX)**, who was also joined by **Rep. Robert Mendendez (D-NJ)** and **Sens. Jeff Bingaman (D-NM)** and **Patty Murray (D-WA)**.

Together with **Rep. Susan Davis (D-CA)**, Hinojosa has introduced the Graduation for All Act, H.R. 3085, which would provide funds for schools with the lowest graduation rates to hire literacy coaches, who would train teachers across the curriculum to incorporate research-based literacy instruction into their teaching. The Pathways for All Students to Succeed (PASS) Act, S. 1554, introduced by Sen. Murray, and the Graduation for All Act would help fill a gap in federal policy for students in secondary schools. The PASS Act 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.

More details on the Graduation for All campaign are available on Rep. Hinojosa’s Web site, at <http://hinojosa.house.gov/news/pressrelease.cfm?id=428>.



MAKING A GOOD EDUCATION WIDELY AVAILABLE: Fattah and Frost Say There Has Been Too Little Change in Fifty Years Since *Brown v. Board*

On May 17, 1954, in rendering its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court found that “in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” Today, fifty years after that landmark decision, **Rep. Chaka Fattah (D-PA)** and **Alliance for Excellent Education president Susan Frost** argue that far too little has changed for far too many students in schools throughout the nation.

Making a Good Education Widely Available

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In “Making a Good Education Widely Available,” published on May 12 in *The Hill*, Fattah and Frost maintain that it is still impossible to say that our schools are providing an “equal” education to all students. They suggest that the Student Bill of Rights, H.R. 236, introduced by Rep. Fattah with 181 cosponsors, would help address the “nationwide phenomenon of educationally inadequate or inequitable public school systems, in which high-quality public schools serve high-income communities and poor-quality schools serve low-income urban, rural, and minority communities.” Fattah’s bill would hold states accountable for providing resources for basic rights, including highly qualified teachers, challenging curricula, up-to-date textbooks and materials, small classes, and guidance counselors for all students who rely on public schools for their education.

“We know what needs to be done to improve student achievement levels,” Fattah and Frost wrote. “We can increase literacy levels and graduation rates—there are successful programs doing just that in many communities around the nation. What is needed now is the national political will to expand these programs so that they benefit all of our nation’s young people.”

The text of “Making a Good Education Widely Available” can be found at http://www.thehill.com/news/051204/ss_fattah.aspx.



KERRY OFFERS DETAILS ON EDUCATION AGENDA: Plan Focuses on Graduation Rates and Highly Qualified Teachers

Earlier this month, John Kerry outlined a comprehensive plan to improve schools throughout the country. On May 4, he unveiled a new plan to increase the number of high school graduates by one million over the next five years. Two days later, he presented a “new bargain for America’s children and teachers” that will “offer teachers more,” but will “ask for more in return.”

To reduce high school dropout rates, Kerry proposed \$50 million a year for tutors and teacher training to improve literacy for middle and high school students who lack basic skills and struggle to meet high standards. Another initiative suggests breaking up troubled large high schools into career academies, alternative schools, and other innovative schools. He would build smaller schools and help to create learning environments where students can feel more at home. To fund these efforts, Kerry proposed increasing funding for the Smaller Learning Communities program by \$150 million a year. To encourage students to stay in school, Kerry’s plan would support state legislation that denies a driver’s license to students who drop out of high school.

Kerry’s “bargain” with America’s teachers includes a federal investment of \$30 billion over ten years for better pay and preparation for the nation’s teachers, but also requires higher standards from teachers and greater rewards for results from states and districts. If implemented, Kerry said his initiative would recruit or retain 500,000 teachers over the next four years.

As part of his plan to offer better pay, preparation, and support, Kerry proposed a pay raise of at least \$5,000 for teachers who teach in high-needs schools and those who teach in hard-to-staff subjects such as math and science. To draw more people into the teaching profession, he would establish a new teacher corps for recent college graduates and pair veteran teachers with teachers

who are new to the profession. In return, Kerry would require rigorous tests for all new teachers and invest in a national initiative to help determine the right standards for these tests. He would also require states to develop “fast, fair procedures” for improving or replacing teachers who do not perform at the level expected of them. On the other end of the spectrum, he would offer increased pay and responsibility to teachers who excel.

“We can’t afford as a nation to lose as many children as we’re losing today, because they’re dropping out of school, and nobody’s going after them to find out what the problem is or making certain that there’s some kind of alternative school setting for them to learn,” Kerry said.

The Presidential Candidates Now Updated

For additional analysis and a side-by-side comparison of proposals from the two major presidential candidates as they relate to secondary school education, read *The Presidential Candidates: Proposals to Increase High School Graduation Rates*. The Alliance for Excellent Education will continually update this brief to reflect new proposals by the candidates as they are announced. The document is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/ThePresidentialCandidates/index.html>.



TRANSFORMING HIGH SCHOOLS: New Study Finds Quality of Instruction the Key to Success

In an effort to explain why successfully “turned-around” elementary schools greatly outnumber their high school counterparts, **Pedro A. Noguera, professor at the Steinhart School of Education at New York University**, examined ten Boston high schools. Noting that the Boston Public School system has invested a substantial amount of money and time into improving student achievement in high school over the past several years with only mixed results, Noguera wanted to find out why high schools seem to be so difficult to reform.

In “Transforming High Schools,” which appeared in the May 2004 issue of *Educational Leadership*, Noguera looked at two of the most common reforms already under way in the Boston high schools: high-stakes testing and personalized schooling. He found that, with the exception of two, the schools in the study that adopted new structures—such as block scheduling, advisory systems, and small learning communities—did not focus enough on the quality of instruction that students received. Far too often, administrators assumed that the changes in schools’ organizational structure would singlehandedly lead to improved student achievement. Noguera found that out of the ten schools studied, only two were successful—those with a “laserlike focus” on teaching and learning.

High-Stakes Testing Requires High-Quality Teaching

In Massachusetts, students in the class of 2003 were the first required to pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam in order to graduate. After hundreds of tenth graders failed the test on their first try, many schools in the study began to offer extra assistance to help the students pass in a subsequent attempt. Several schools enrolled failing students in a double-period test preparation course that was modeled after similar classes for the SAT. However, the study found that many of the classes were “disorganized, poorly managed, and taught by unskilled teachers.” For example, in one class, a substitute teacher spent most of his time reading the newspaper during the three months in which he was responsible for the class.

Transforming High Schools

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The math results were just as disappointing. The MCAS exam expects students to have taken three years of college prep math: Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II. However, several students in the study sample had not only failed Algebra I; many of their schools offered only a limited number of classes of advanced math—mainly because they did not have enough teachers to teach the course material. This dearth of high-quality teachers led schools to resort to quick fixes, such as teaching to the test. Unfortunately for the students, these quick fixes were rarely successful; at some schools nearly half of all seniors failed the MCAS.

Meanwhile, at the two successful schools, the average student scored at the proficient level, and several students achieved the highest level on the state exam. While both these schools had requirements for admission, the requirements were in place mainly to let students know that they would have to meet high standards and expectations. Both schools also provided onsite, year-round professional development to teachers based on their needs and required a high level of parental involvement. For students, the schools also provided college counseling beginning in the ninth grade.

Smaller Learning Communities Alone Are Not a “Silver Bullet”

In addition to high-stakes testing, many schools also tried to create a more personalized learning environment for students through the implementation of small learning communities (schools-within-schools), new systems for advising students, and block scheduling. However, in several schools, administrators were the only people who even knew that a small learning community had been put into place. Students reported that, other than a change in their course schedule, they noticed no appreciable change in their school experience. The advisory system was similarly ineffective. While teachers were supposed to act as student counselors during an extended homeroom period once a week, they rarely knew how to use the allotted time and often lacked experience in counseling.

As a result of this poor implementation, the personalized learning environments and student-teacher relationships did not materialize. More than 80 percent of students said there was no adult at their school to whom they felt they could turn if they had a serious personal problem. Fifty-six percent of students said they did not believe that their teachers really cared about them. Meanwhile, more than 90 percent of students at the two successful schools said they had access to adults with whom they could discuss a personal problem and felt encouraged to do so.

The report found that rather than simply introduce reforms and hope for the best, the two successful schools “took time to make sure that teachers, parents, and students understood the purpose behind a given reform strategy. Equally important, they looked for evidence that the reform was achieving its goals.” Meanwhile, adults responsible for implementing reforms at the other schools were “oblivious to how the changes affected the students.” They had no systemic process to evaluate their reforms and did not seem to recognize the importance of seeking input from students.

To read the complete “Transforming High Schools” article, visit http://www.ascd.org/publications/ed_lead/200405/noguera.html.



PUSHED OUT OR PULLED UP?: New Manhattan Institute Report Argues Exit Exams Do Not Affect Graduation Rates

A new report released from the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research discusses the effect of high school exit exams on the dropout rate. In *Pushed Out or Pulled Up? Exit Exams and Dropout Rates in Public High Schools*, Jay Greene and Marcus Winters tackle the often-discussed issue of whether exit exams drive already low graduation rates even lower.

According to the report, it is not evident that exit exams increase the requirements for graduation at all. As Greene and Winters explain, “While it seems intuitive that raising the requirements for graduation would force graduation rates downward, the evidence on this subject is far from clear.” In reality, the report claims, the idea that exit exams cause higher dropout rates is based on spurious anecdotal evidence.

In an effort to ensure that high school diplomas are meaningful, and that high school graduates meet the basic thresholds of academic proficiency and job readiness, twenty-four states have adopted exit exams that students must pass before graduating. The argument for exit exams is that diplomas may lose their value as an indicator of academic achievement if students graduate lacking even basic proficiency. Therefore, requiring a certain score on an objective standardized test should guarantee that students have, in fact, earned their diploma.

Greene and Winters evaluated the graduation data from each of these states using two different methods, one used by the National Center of Education Statistics and the other devised by Greene himself. Both analyses found that high school exit exams have no significant effect on a state’s graduation rate.

Specifically, the authors contend that exams have no net effect on graduation rates for two reasons. Their first theory is that passing exit exams requires very low levels of academic proficiency; the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation gave an overall rating of “poor” to the rigor of state-mandated standardized tests. The second reason is that, in many cases, students are given multiple chances to pass the exams before they are finally denied a diploma. As Greene and Winters explain, “Exit exam requirements may not only be a low hurdle, but students have multiple chances to jump the hurdle.”

According to **Keith Gayler, the associate director of the Center on Education Policy**, the Manhattan Institute report is far from the definitive answer on the subject of exit exams. “There’s only so many data points they can control for,” he told *Education Week*. “The report points out again the difficulty in answering the question now—and just means that the debate is still up in the air.”

In *State High School Exit Exams: Put to the Test*, released in late 2003 by the Center on Education Policy, exams “appear to have a positive impact on curriculum and instruction, and appear to encourage schools to cover more of the state standards and add remedial and other special courses for students at risk of failing.” However, the center also pointed out that a moderate amount of evidence suggests that exams are associated with higher dropout rates.

Pushed Out or Pulled Up?

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Additionally, *State High School Exit Exams: A Baseline Report*, released in late 2002 by the center, raises concerns that as more students are required to pass exams, states are not moving fast enough to adequately address issues for disadvantaged, minority and disabled students who are most likely to fail the exams on the first go-round. A potential long-term result is more high school dropouts.

Pushed Out or Pulled Up? is available at http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp_05.htm.

The Center on Education Policy reports are available at <http://www.ctredpol.org/highschoolsexit/>.



TEACHER PREPARATION AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN EIGHTH-GRADE MATHEMATICS: Eighth-Grade Students Score Higher under the Tutelage of Well-Qualified Teachers

According to a new **American Institutes for Research** report, students whose teachers were certified or had a major or minor in mathematics scored significantly higher on the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) eighth-grade mathematics test.

The report, *Prepared to Teach: Teacher Preparation and Student Achievement in Eighth-Grade Mathematics*, used data on individual students and their teachers from the 2000 NAEP eighth-grade mathematics test to examine the relationship between teacher qualification and student achievement. The report focused on four specific teacher qualifications: teacher certification, academic major or minor, highest postsecondary degree, and years of teaching experience.

The mean score on the 2000 NAEP eighth-grade mathematics test was 274. While eighth graders who were taught by a certified teacher scored 277 on average, students without a certified teacher scored eleven points lower. According to the report, the estimated difference between these two groups was roughly equivalent to the estimated difference between students who were and eligible for free and reduced lunch and those who were not. In plainer terms, a low-income student with a certified teacher would, on average, score at the same level as a non-low-income student with an uncertified teacher.

Among students whose teacher had a major or minor in mathematics, the average score was 279, while students who were taught math by a teacher with an academic major or minor in a field outside of math scored dramatically lower (261), a difference of eighteen points.

Teachers with qualifications associated with higher scores were not equitably distributed among all students, according to the report. Students at the greatest risk of failure—poor students and students who were tracked into low-ability math classes—were more likely to have uncertified teachers or teachers teaching out-of-field. For example, 70 percent of economically disadvantaged eighth graders had teachers with a major or minor in math, compared to 83 percent of non-low-income students. Economically disadvantaged students were also more likely (25 percent to 13 percent) to have math teachers with a non-math major or minor.

The report also found that students who entered eighth grade with academic deficits were not likely to get the extra help they needed to catch up. In fact, these students were less likely to have a teacher with more than five years of experience teaching mathematics. They were also less likely to have a mathematics teacher with a major or minor in mathematics. According to the report, having a teacher with a major or minor in academics instead of a teacher with an out-of-field major could mean an increase of twenty-two points, on average, to a student in a low-ability class (258 average score for major/minor vs. 236 average score for out-of-field).

The complete report is available at
http://www.air.org/news_events/documents/AERA2004PreparedtoTeach.pdf.

American Institutes for Research to Merge with New American Schools

Earlier this month, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) announced that it would merge with New American Schools (NAS). While the full merger will not occur until early 2005, the two organizations are beginning a strategic alliance immediately. The American Institutes of Research is a leader in behavioral and social science research. New American Schools is a leading provider of professional services and investment in K–12 education. Under the merger, New American Schools will function as the consulting arm of AIR and will retain its distinct and recognizable identity in the education arena.

“With NAS we can bring the most current research results into the classroom more quickly,” said **Sol Pelavin, president and chief executive officer of AIR**. “AIR has long conducted important research in education with the goal of making sure their results have an impact upon student learning. New American Schools allows our findings to have a positive influence on students’ lives more quickly.”

Read the press release at http://www.air.org/news_events/Documents/Release200405NAS-AIRMerger.doc.

The Broad Center for the Management of School Systems Now Accepting Applications for the 2005 Urban Superintendents Academy

The Broad Center for the Management of School Systems is seeking high-achieving, dynamic executives from the corporate, nonprofit, government, military, and education sectors who have a passion for improving public education by serving as chief executive officers in our nation’s largest urban school systems for its Urban Superintendents Academy.

The academy is a rigorous, ten-month executive management program designed to prepare the next generation of public school chief executives. The academy expects fellows to move rapidly into CEO or other senior executive positions in urban school systems after graduation. To date, six fellows from the first two classes have been appointed as superintendents. Several other graduates have been hired or promoted as senior executives in large urban districts or as superintendents in smaller urban districts.

For more information, to submit a nomination, or to download an application, visit the Broad Center’s Web site, at <http://www.broadcenter.org>.

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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