



# Straight A's

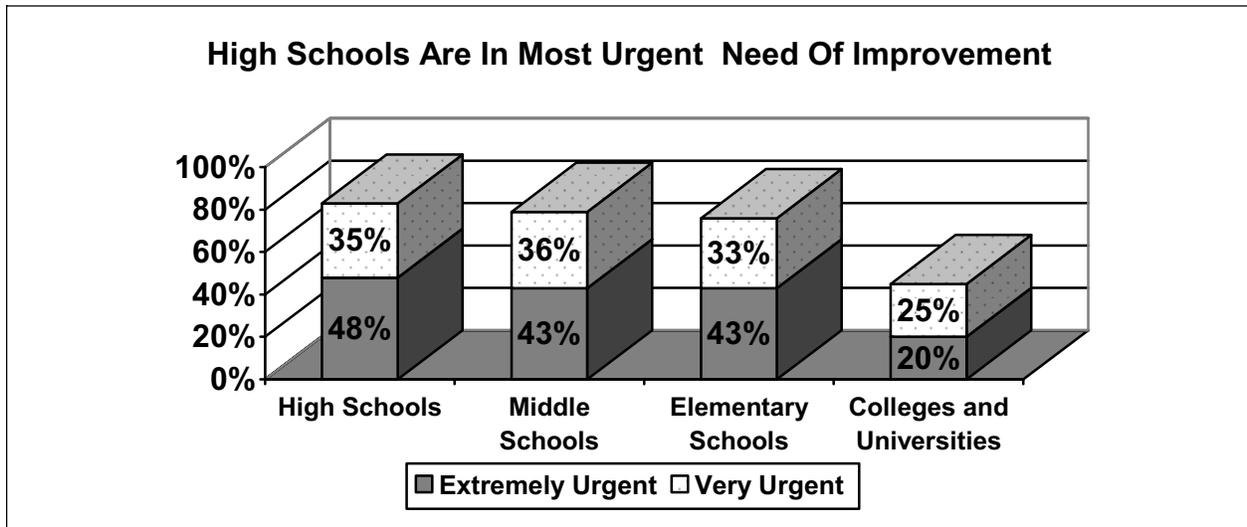
Public Education Policy And Progress



## AMERICANS ON HIGH SCHOOLS: "IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT!": National Poll Finds American Public Feels More Urgency to Improve High Schools Than Elementary Education

The American public believes that improving the nation's high schools should be the country's number one education priority, according to a poll released on August 24 by the Alliance for Excellent Education. According to the poll, 83 percent of Americans believe there is an "extremely urgent" or "very urgent" need to improve the nation's high schools, compared with 79 percent for middle schools and 76 percent for elementary schools (see chart below).

"This poll is important because it clearly states that for the first time, Americans believe that high schools should be a top priority for our federal and state officials, as well as for business and community leaders," said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. "The poll also shows that simply improving grade school is not enough; the commitment must be made and maintained at every level."



According to the poll, 87 percent of the American public is "extremely" or "very concerned" to learn that the national graduation rate is only about 70 percent and that graduation rates drop to 50 percent or lower in many urban areas. Most Americans believe that these low graduation rates are not without dangerous ramifications for the American economy. On question after question, respondents indicate that increasing the number of high school students who graduate prepared for college and good jobs is critical to maintaining a strong society and to assuring the competitive position of the country in an increasingly global economy. African-American respondents, in particular, indicate that the need for high school reform is urgent, with 94

## **Americans on High Schools**

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percent calling it very or extremely urgent; 81 percent of whites and 82 percent of Hispanics agree with this assessment.

“If this dismal situation is to change, policymakers need to know that their constituents consider high school reform a pressing issue that must be dealt with now,” Wise said. “In fact, Americans overwhelmingly want governors, members of Congress, and the president to pay more attention to high schools.” According to the poll, 78 percent of Americans believe that the president and Congress are not paying enough attention to the state of public high schools. Fifty-seven percent say the same about their governor.

How do we solve the dropout crisis in America’s high schools? Poll respondents overwhelmingly believe that improving reading comprehension and writing is the “most important factor” in increasing graduation rates. In fact, 40 percent of respondents say that literacy skills have gotten worse over the last ten years. Respondents are also willing to invest their own money into high school reforms, with 70 percent saying they are “extremely willing” or “very willing” to pay more in taxes to ensure that all kids can read, comprehend, and write.

However, while respondents overwhelmingly believe that high school students could still be helped to succeed, they acknowledge that most high schools lack the resources to provide the necessary assistance. Eighty-five percent of Americans say that students can still get the help they need to succeed in high school, but 61 percent say that high schools are not well equipped to meet the needs of students who are struggling academically.

The poll, which was conducted by Lake Snell Perry Mermin/Decision Research in mid-August 2005, represents the first comprehensive survey of public opinion on high schools since President Bush and many governors announced major initiatives to improve the educational experience of and outcomes for America’s older students. It asked twelve hundred individuals from across the nation what they know about the state of America’s high schools, what should be done to improve schools, and who should be held responsible for the reforms needed to make all secondary schools effective centers of teaching and learning. To ensure that the views of all segments of the population were adequately represented, the poll oversampled African Americans and Hispanics. In some cases, Spanish-speaking surveyors were used.

At an Alliance event on August 24, **Alysia Snell, a partner at Lake Snell Perry Mermin/Decision Research**, reviewed the poll’s findings in detail. She and Governor Wise were joined by **Janet Murguia, president of the National Council of La Raza**, **Dr. John Jackson, national director of education for the NAACP**, and **Dr. Mel Riddle, principal of JEB Stuart High School in Virginia**, to discuss the poll’s findings and the importance of public support for reform efforts designed to change policies at the national, state, and local levels, with the goal of redesigning American high schools to meet the needs of the twenty-first century.

Materials from the release event, including Ms. Snell’s PowerPoint presentation, speaker biographies, and video from the event, are available at <http://www.all4ed.org/events/NationalPollRelease.html>.



## **STRIVING READERS APPLICATIONS NOW AVAILABLE: U.S. Department of Education to Make Approximately Eight Grants for Fiscal Year 2005**

The U.S. Department of Education is now accepting grant applications for the \$25 million Striving Readers program, which was created to improve the literacy skills of teenage students who read below grade level. The department expects to make approximately eight grant awards ranging from \$1 million to \$5 million, with an average grant award of \$3 million. Awards will be made for a five-year period.

The Striving Readers program seeks to raise the overall level of reading achievement in middle and high schools by improving the quality of literacy instruction across all subject areas. In addition, by testing a variety of interventions through rigorous studies to assess their effectiveness, the department hopes to build a strong, scientific research base around specific strategies that improve adolescent literacy skills.

There are two absolute requirements of which applicants should be aware. First, awards will go to districts that have schools composed of students in grades six and above and are Title I eligible. Second, grant applications must include comprehensive reading initiative components that include

- a rigorous program evaluation that includes a randomized control trial;
- school-level strategies designed to increase reading achievement for all students (includes needs assessment, professional development, and measuring student performance); and
- targeted intervention for struggling readers, defined as students who are at least two years behind grade level (includes assessments to identify struggling readers, a supplementary literacy intervention, professional development, and a process for monitoring student progress).

Given the comprehensive and demanding eligibility requirements, the department has assured the Alliance for Excellent Education that it will work with potential grantees as the submission process moves forward, and that it will exercise all possible flexibility to ensure that all qualified applicants are given full consideration. Promising applicants should not be deterred from applying for Striving Readers grants.

Because this is the first time that the Striving Readers program is soliciting applications, the Alliance would like to track what level of response this opportunity is yielding. **If your district is interested in and/or definitely applying for Striving Readers grants, please send a short email message to [StrivingReaders@all4ed.org](mailto:StrivingReaders@all4ed.org).** This information will be used for internal information purposes only and will not be shared with outside parties.

The department will conduct a series of briefings on this competition via conference call to clarify the purposes of the program, the selection criteria, and the competition process. Notice of intent to apply is due by **September 14, 2005**, and full applications are due by **November 14, 2005**. Grants are expected to be awarded in December 2005.

The complete Striving Readers application and additional information is available at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/strivingreaders/applicant.html>. Additional questions should be directed to the department via email at [StrivingReaders@ed.gov](mailto:StrivingReaders@ed.gov) or at 202-205-6272.



***TEACHER ATTRITION: A COSTLY LOSS TO THE NATION AND TO THE STATES: Alliance Analysis Finds That Teacher Vacancies Cost the United States Close to \$5 Billion Annually***

As Labor Day weekend heralded the last vestiges of summer, students from around the country put away their beach towels and swimming trunks in favor of backpacks and that perfect outfit for the first day of school. At the same time, the nation’s teachers are making last-minute preparations for their first day in front of a new group of students. However, more than 394,000 teachers will not be returning to the schools in which they taught last year, according to *Teacher Attrition: A Costly Loss to the Nation and to the States*, a new brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education. What’s more, replacing these individuals could cost the country up to \$5 billion. (These figures do not include the teachers who retire).

Although some of the individuals who are leaving their schools are veteran teachers, many of them fall in the category of “new” teachers—that is, those who have taught school for fewer than five years. In fact, almost 50 percent of teachers nationally will leave the profession within the first five years of entering it. Of the total number of teachers not returning to their schools, more than 173,000 (44 percent) are leaving their profession altogether, costing the nation about \$2 billion in replacement costs. Others are transferring to other schools, at an approximate cost of another \$3 billion.

“The price of losing so many teachers, particularly so many who have just begun their teaching careers, is enormous in terms of dollars,” said Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and the former governor of West Virginia, “but it’s also costly in terms of the quality of education we provide our students. Teachers who stay in the classroom gain experience, and their students benefit.”

Teachers cite a lack of support and poor working conditions among the primary factors for leaving. Beginning teachers are particularly vulnerable because they are more likely than their more experienced colleagues to be assigned low-performing students. Despite the added challenges that come with teaching higher-need children, most new teachers are given little professional support, feedback, or demonstration of what it takes to help their students succeed.

The Alliance brief explains that comprehensive induction programs have proven effective at keeping good teachers in the classroom. In fact, studies demonstrate that new teacher turnover rates can be cut in half through comprehensive induction—a combination of high-quality mentoring, professional development and support, scheduled interaction with other teachers in the school and in the larger community, and formal assessments for new teachers during at least their first two years of teaching.

Successful models from around the country have shown that comprehensive induction can more than pay for itself. For example, using a two-year program in California as a model, **Anthony Villar of the New Teacher Center at University of California, Santa Cruz**, found that comprehensive induction returns \$1.37 for every \$1 invested. And yet, across the nation, states spend millions of dollars each year to replace teachers who leave the classroom instead of

investing in these programs, which simultaneously retain newer teachers and help them become better, more effective teachers in a shorter time.

The loss—to taxpayers, schools, educators, students, and communities—is immense. It represents, for example, approximately \$8.5 million in North Dakota, \$179 million in Pennsylvania, and a whopping half a billion dollars for a large state like Texas. (A complete state-by-state breakdown is included as part of the brief).

The Alliance for Excellent Education calculated the annual cost of teacher attrition using data from the U.S. Department of Education, an analysis by **Dr. Richard Ingersoll of the University of Pennsylvania** for the National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future, and statistics from the National Education Association.

*Teacher Attrition: A Costly Loss to the Nation and to the States* is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/TeacherAttrition.pdf>.

### ***Induction into Learning Communities Stresses Need for Teacher Induction Programs***

Most new teachers receive only limited assistance from mentors, who may not have the time or training needed to provide the kind of instructional assistance new teachers need, according to a new report from the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF). The report, *Induction into Learning Communities*, argues for a movement away from traditional mentoring programs and toward induction systems that include a network of people, supports, and processes that focus on ensuring that new teachers become effective in their work.

“We want all teachers to have a strong start when they begin their careers in the classroom but in order to achieve that goal, we must rethink the way we support teachers,” said **NCTAF President Tom Carroll**. “The era of isolated teaching in stand-alone classrooms cannot continue. School leaders must create an environment where all members of the community share responsibility for each other’s success and for the success of all students in the school.”

The U.S. model of a “teacher on an island” stands in stark contrast to the induction systems and high levels of interaction among teachers internationally. In fact, the NCTAF report highlights open-door policies, candid conversations about lessons, and “opportunities for reflection and discussion that are the hallmarks of sustained programs that introduce novices to the valued norms of the teaching community” in countries such as Switzerland, Japan, China, New Zealand, and France. In each of these countries, the report noted, “induction is not viewed as a tool for teacher retention, but as a means to help beginning teachers reach their potential.”

In the United States, however, most beginning teachers receive little or no support. If they are lucky, they are paired with veteran teachers who act as mentors and work with them on a one-to-one basis. Sadly, the end goal of these programs is often not to help new teachers reach their potential, but just to help them “survive” the first year.

To help stem the tide of teachers leaving the classroom and help new teachers develop their skills, the report argues for induction systems that go beyond mentoring and include such critical elements as “opportunities to observe and be observed by other teachers, common planning time to work with colleagues and share lessons, participation in an external network of teachers, reduced class preparations and assignment of non-teaching duties.”

“It has become clear that comprehensive induction greatly improves the chances of a teacher staying at their school and in the profession,” said Carroll. “Without strong induction programs, almost one out of every two teachers has left the classroom by the end of the fifth year.”

The complete report is available at [http://www.nctaf.org/documents/nctaf/NCTAF\\_Induction\\_Paper\\_2005.pdf](http://www.nctaf.org/documents/nctaf/NCTAF_Induction_Paper_2005.pdf).



## **READY OR NOT, HERE THEY COME: Half of College Freshmen Likely to Struggle with the Reading Demands of Their College Courses, According to Results from College Entrance Exam**

While record numbers of high school students took the ACT Assessment college entrance exam in 2005, recently released national and state data revealed that a majority of high school graduates lack college-level skills in reading, English, math, and science. In a bit of good news, the number of minority students taking the ACT is increasing, indicating that more minorities are thinking about college. Since 2001, the number of Hispanic students taking the ACT has increased by 40 percent, while the number of African-American students has increased by 23 percent over the same time frame. However, achievement gaps still remain, with Asian-American students once again earning the highest average composite score, at 22.1, white students coming in second at 21.9, followed by Native American students (18.7), Hispanic students (18.6), and African-American students (17.0). (The ACT is scored on a scale of 1 to 36).

“It’s wonderful that more and more students who might not have considered college several years ago are now making plans for education beyond high school,” said **Richard L. Ferguson, ACT’s chief executive officer**. “However, there are too many students who graduated this year without all of the skills they need to be ready for college or job training.”

According to ACT’s new College Readiness Benchmark in reading, only half of test takers have adequate college-level skills in reading comprehension. Based on past ACT scores, students who receive at least a 21 on the ACT Reading Test are very likely to “succeed” (defined as earning a C grade or higher) in college-level courses such as history, sociology, literature, and others that require extensive reading. Only 51 percent of 2005 graduates who took the ACT met or exceeded this benchmark.

This year’s scores also show virtually no improvement in the percentage of students who met or exceeded the ACT College Readiness Benchmark in English, math, or science, with scores even more dismal than the reading scores. Just 41 percent of test takers scored at the benchmark or higher on the ACT Math Test and only 26 percent scored at the benchmark or higher on the ACT Science Test. Sixty-eight percent of test takers scored at or above the benchmark in English, the same percentage as the year before.

ACT reports that this lack of college preparation is the result of students not taking the right kind of coursework in high school to prepare them for college and work. In fact, ACT reports that just more than half (55 percent) of test takers reported taking the recommended “core” curriculum for college-bound students of four years of English and three years each of math (algebra and higher), science, and social studies. And even when the right courses *are* taken, they often lack the rigor or focus on the higher-level course content that students need to learn.

Arriving at high school without the proper skills to succeed is also a problem for many students. “We need to identify students at much earlier grades—eighth grade and earlier—and make sure they have a solid foundation of basic knowledge and skills needed for rigorous high school-level courses,” said Ferguson. “Only then will it be possible to graduate students who are all ready for college or job training.”



## ***STATES TRY HARDER, BUT GAPS PERSIST: Analysis of State Exit Exams Finds Little Improvement in Closing the Achievement Gap***

Currently, twenty-five states use or plan to soon implement exit exams, tests that students must pass in order to receive a high school diploma. According to a new report from the Center on Education Policy (CEP), pass rates for state exit exams have not moved much in the last year, despite a major push by many states to implement intensive preparation and remediation programs aimed at helping more students succeed. *States Try Harder, But Gaps Persist*, the fourth in a series of annual reports that tracks the status, characteristics, and effect of the exams, also found that achievement gaps on high schools exams are largely unchanged.

Among students taking the test for the first time, pass rates ranged from 70 percent to 90 percent in most states, but achievement gaps between white students and their Hispanic and African-American peers averaged 20 to 30 percentage points in most states. Gaps are also large among students from low-income families and students with disabilities. In particular, English Language Learners (ELL) struggled with the tests, with pass rates 30 to 40 points below the student average in math, and even greater gaps in reading.

“We have to resolve the fundamental question about the fairness of the exit exams,” said **Jack Jennings, CEP president and CEO**. “If this reform strategy is going to succeed we need to make sure that there are appropriate supports for [ELL students], students with disabilities, and others. States have started to move toward greater supports, but they must greatly accelerate their efforts.”

By 2012, three-quarters of all American public school students will have to take exit exams, including “disproportionate amounts of minority students (82 percent) and ELL students (87 percent), in part due to heavy concentrations of Latino students living in exit exam states.

The complete report is available at <http://www.cep-dc.org/>.

### ***Coaches in the High School Classroom: Studies in Implementing High School Reform***

As more students enter middle and high school reading several grades behind their peers, the education community has begun to focus on adolescent literacy interventions that can teach reading and reading comprehension to older students.

To promote and support these new instructional practices, many districts have created cadres of literacy coaches to work directly with teachers in the classroom. *Coaches in the High School Classroom*, a report by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, takes a in-depth look at the work of six coaches working in the Boston and Houston school districts to shed light on the processes, choices, and challenges posed by the role of the instructional coach.

The report is available at [http://www.annenberginstitute.org/images/SNS\\_Coaches.pdf](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/images/SNS_Coaches.pdf).

**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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