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Public Education Policy And Progress



STRIVING READERS ACT INTRODUCED IN THE HOUSE: Act Mirrors Legislation Introduced in the Senate in March

On May 14, **U.S. Representatives John Yarmuth (D-KY) and Todd Russell Platts (R-PA)** introduced new legislation that would provide grants to every state for reading and comprehension programs to meet the needs of students in grades four through twelve.

Representatives Allen Boyd (D-FL), Ben Chandler (D-KY), Ruben Hinojosa (D-TX), Jim McGovern (D-MA), Sheila Jackson-Lee (D-TX), Mike Rogers (R-AL), Jo Bonner (R-AL), Ralph Regula (R-OH), Raul Grijalva (D-AZ), Jason Altmire (D-PA), and Mazie Hirono (D-HI) joined them as original cosponsors.

“The Striving Readers pilot program has been very effective, right here in Kentucky, at helping students, who are on the verge of dropping out of high school, graduate and become legitimate candidates for a full college education,” Yarmuth said.

Called the Striving Readers Act, the legislation would help ensure that older students who are struggling to read and write at grade level receive the literacy interventions they need to succeed in school and graduate from high school with a meaningful diploma. Specifically, it would help states create statewide literacy initiatives for students in grades 4–12, share data on student progress with parents and the public, and improve teacher training and professional development in literacy so that all students receive high-quality instruction. Striving Readers would also provide funding to districts and schools to create plans to improve literacy, develop top-notch assessments, train teachers in every subject area in literacy strategies, and use data to improve teaching and learning.

“Congressmen Yarmuth and Platts are to be commended for addressing the needs of the millions of American middle and high school students who are not reading and writing at grade level, said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Striving Readers will provide these students with the supports they need to succeed in high school, college, and today’s competitive workplace. The federal investment will be returned many times over in an economy strengthened by many more high school graduates, higher wage earners, and more productive citizens.”

The Striving Readers Act mirrors legislation introduced in the U.S. Senate on March 22 by **U.S. Senators Jeff Sessions (R-AL) and Patty Murray (D-WA)**. **Senators John Kerry (D-MA), Thad Cochran (R-MS), Daniel Akaka (D-HI), Trent Lott (R-MI), Christopher Dodd (D-CT), Richard Burr (R-NC), Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), Blanche Lincoln (D-AR), and Pete Domenici (R-NM)** joined them as original cosponsors of the legislation. In the time since the

Striving Readers Act Introduced in the House (Continued from p. 1)

legislation was introduced, **Senators Richard Durbin (D-IL), Johnny Isakson (R-GA), Tom Harkin (D-IA), Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Evan Bayh (D-IN), and Jon Tester (D-MT)** have also signed on as cosponsors.

If signed into law, the Striving Readers Act would build on the existing Striving Readers program, but would be far more comprehensive than the original program, which was first funded at \$24.8 million as a Title I demonstration program in fiscal year (FY) 2005. In recent years, the Striving Readers program has seen small increases, but has yet to see the funding that would allow its reach to extend beyond a handful of school districts. The Striving Readers Act would authorize \$200 million in FY 2008 for the program, with increased funding through FY 2012, which would allow the program to expand to every state.

Brief Funding History of the Striving Readers Program

Fiscal Year	President Bush's Budget Request	Final Authorization
2005	\$100 million	\$24.8 million
2006	\$200 million	\$29.7 million
2007	\$100 million	\$31.9 million
2008	\$100 million	To be determined

Currently, only eight programs nationwide receive funding under the Striving Readers Act—even though the U.S. Department of Education received close to one hundred fifty applications in the initial competition and nine hundred intentions to apply for a grant. Additional grants are unlikely without a corresponding increase in funding. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education announced in March that it will use FY 2007 funds to continue to support the eight Striving Readers projects that were first funded in March 2006. The department also announced that it will not hold a new competition for additional awards in 2007.

More information on the Striving Readers Act is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/legislative/index.html>.



UNDERSTANDING HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES: Alliance Analysis Highlights Discrepancies Between State-Reported Rates and Independent Estimates

A new analysis by the Alliance for Excellent Education finds that discrepancies continue to exist between the graduation rates reported by the states and the U.S. Department of Education and those estimated by independent researchers. According to *Understanding High School Graduation Rates*, the average difference between state and independent sources is about 13 percent, but the gap ranges from 4 percent (New Jersey) to 32 percent (New Mexico).

“The nation will not have met the goal of leaving no child behind until every student graduates from high school prepared for success in college, work, and life,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Providing an excellent education starts with understanding whether the student who starts high school is the one who stays and earns a diploma. Misleading graduation rate calculations, inadequate systems

to track students throughout their education, and lack of accountability by the school are undermining efforts to understand and increase the nation’s graduation rate.”

According to the brief, twenty-two states report graduation rates that are 4 to 9 percent higher than those reported by independent researchers **Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute** and **Christopher Swanson of Editorial Projects in Education**. Another nineteen states have gaps of between 10 and 20 percent, and nine states have a discrepancy of more than 20 percent between their state-reported rates and independent estimates. The following table includes some of the states with the biggest discrepancies.

State	State-Reported Graduation Rate	Independent Analysis (Source)	Difference
New Mexico	89%	57% (<i>Education Week</i>)	32%
North Carolina	97%	66% (<i>Education Week</i>)	31%
Louisiana	89%	61% (<i>Education Week</i>)	28%
South Carolina	78%	53% (<i>Education Week</i>)	25%
Massachusetts	96%	72% (<i>Education Week</i>)	24%
Delaware	83%	61% (<i>Education Week</i>)	22%
South Dakota	96%	75% (<i>Education Week</i>)	21%

In addition to comparing graduation-rate reporting, *Understanding High School Graduation Rates* reports the cost of the dropout crisis in terms of lost earnings, reduced tax revenue, and increased spending on Medicaid and reducing crime. The costs to the nation as a whole appear in the box to the right. Each state report breaks these numbers down further to reveal the cost of the dropout crisis in each of the fifty states.

The brief also identifies three core areas that are fundamental to calculating, reporting, and improving accurate graduation rates. First, all states should use the same accurate graduation rate calculations. Second, states need data systems that track individual student data from the time students enter the educational system until the day they leave it. Finally, the brief notes the need for federal policy that meaningfully holds high schools accountable for improving student achievement on test scores and for increasing graduation rates so that low-performing students are not unnecessarily held back or encouraged to leave school without a diploma.

The complete report, including a state-by-state analysis, can be found at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/wcwc/index.html>.

Cost of High School Dropouts

Each year nearly 1.2 million students in the United States do not graduate with their peers.

- Dropouts from the Class of 2006 **cost the nation more than \$309 billion** in lost wages, taxes, and productivity over their lifetimes.
- If the United States’ likely dropouts from the Class of 2006 had graduated, the nation could have **saved more than \$17 billion** in Medicaid and expenditures for uninsured care over the course of those young people’s lifetimes.
- If U.S. high schools and colleges raise the graduation rates of Hispanic, African American, and Native American students to the levels of white students by 2020, the potential increase in personal income would **add more than \$310 billion** to the U.S. economy.
- Increasing the graduation rate and college matriculation of male students in the United States by just 5 percent could lead to **combined savings and revenue of almost \$8 billion** each year by reducing crime-related costs.

New Online Mapping Tool Provides High School Graduation Rates for Every School District in the Nation

On May 9, Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) launched EdWeek Maps, an online mapping tool that allows users to compare high school graduation rates for every school district in the nation. Produced in collaboration with ESRI, a California-based firm responsible for leading geographic information system (GIS) technology, EdWeek Maps uses graduation rates that are based on the percentage of students in the ninth grade who complete high school in four years with a regular diploma. These rates were calculated using the EPE Research Center's Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI), and were released in the 2006 EPE report *Diplomas Count*.

EdWeek Maps also allows users to download special reports containing additional information and analysis regarding a district's graduation rate and to compare local statistics with those at the state and national level. Features, where available, include the percentage of students who drop out in each grade, trends in graduation rates over the last decade, student enrollment levels, teacher-student ratios, student demographics, and comparative segregation levels.

"This tool provides the public—from parents to policymakers—with access to a powerful source of data on graduation rates at the national, state, and local levels," said **Christopher Swanson, director of the EPE Research Center and creator of the CPI**. "Because this information has often been unavailable or unreliable in the past, this is the first time that users nationwide can compare their local schools' success with [that of] neighboring communities and districts around the country."

EPE formally unveiled EdWeek Maps at the National Summit on America's Silent Epidemic in Washington, DC. EPE also announced that it will release more extensive data and more sophisticated mapping technology in June to coincide with the publication of its *Diplomas Count 2007* report, which will contain an updated analysis of graduation rates.

Additional information on this resource can be found at <http://www2.edweek.org/rc/articles/2007/04/25/map.html>.



MAKING WRITING INSTRUCTION A PRIORITY IN AMERICA'S MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS: New Alliance Policy Brief Highlights Students' Writing Deficiencies, Offers Recommendations to Policymakers

Noting that calls to improve student writing are nothing new, a new brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education says that the consequences for poor writing skills are much higher today than at any time in the nation's history. Unfortunately, however, 70–75 percent of today's students fail to write proficiently. According to the brief, *Making Writing Instruction a Priority in America's Middle and High Schools*, which was funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York, even students who plan to go to college often lack basic writing skills. As a result, colleges and businesses must spend billions a year to provide writing instruction to their students and employees.

While acknowledging that reading and writing are "complementary skills," the brief is careful to point out that these skills do not necessarily go hand in hand. "Many students learn to read and comprehend difficult academic materials yet struggle to write coherent or compelling texts of their own," it reads. "Simply put, reading instruction isn't enough. America's students will not become skilled writers unless and until their schools make writing a priority."

Unfortunately, writing instruction is rarely a priority in the nation's schools. According to the brief, very few teachers require more than a few hours of writing per week, and two thirds of

students say their weekly writing assignments add up to less than an hour. And when a writing assignment is given, much of it is cursory, asking students to compose a sentence or two in response to a textbook question, for example, or to write a brief summary of material assigned for homework.

The brief points out that a major reason why middle and high school teachers provide so little writing instruction is because very few teachers—whether in English or in other content areas—receive more than a token amount of training in the teaching of writing. In addition, the amount of time it takes a teacher to read and respond to student writing can be quite large given a teaching load of four or five classes of twenty to thirty or more students each. Moreover, many teachers (especially in math, science, and social studies, but also in the English department) assume that writing instruction isn't their responsibility.

The brief lists several recommendations on how federal policymakers can combat poor writing skills among the nation's middle and high school students. It says that policymakers should invest in a comprehensive federal adolescent literacy program such as the Striving Readers program and increase federal support for the National Writing Project, a proven, effective professional development network that has helped thousands of middle and high school teachers incorporate writing into the curriculum.

The brief also states that policymakers should give schools the flexibility and resources they need to schedule more time for writing instruction and encourage states to incorporate writing skills into content-area standards. Finally, policymakers should support more teacher professional development in adolescent literacy and increase federal funding for enhanced assessments to help states include more student writing in No Child Left Behind accountability systems.

The complete brief is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/WritPrior.pdf>.

U.S. Department of Education Launches Online College-Planning Tool

The U.S. Department of Education recently launched the FAFSA4caster, an online tool designed to help students and families financially prepare and plan for college before students' senior year of high school.

"Improving college access and affordability are key to giving more Americans a chance at higher education and keeping America competitive," said **Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings**. "Families need more information—sooner—about students' federal aid eligibility so that they can plan ahead for college. The FAFSA4caster gives families an important tool they can use to make decisions about the future."

The FAFSA4caster provides students with an early estimate of their eligibility for federal financial aid, including Pell grants. Spellings noted that the launch of the forecaster fulfills one of the "action steps" in the final report of her Commission on the Future of Higher Education, which called for notifying students of their aid eligibility earlier than the spring of their senior year.

In addition to speeding up financial aid notification, the FAFSA4caster reduces the time students will need to spend filling out the FAFSA in their senior year of high school by prepopulating 51 of the form's 102 questions.

Spellings also said that the department intends to launch a more advanced version of the FAFSA4Caster, which will estimate a student's entire federal aid package (including loans), in September 2007.

Additional information about the FAFSA4caster is available at www.federalstudentaid.ed.gov.



NATIONAL SUMMIT ON AMERICA'S SILENT EPIDEMIC: TIME Magazine, MTV, Gates Foundation, and Others Join Forces to Spotlight High Dropout Rates

On May 9, Civic Enterprises, the National Governors Association, TIME magazine, and MTV cosponsored the National Summit on America's Silent Epidemic, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Case Foundation, and the MCJ Foundation. The event was a call to action designed to gather, motivate, and further equip advocates "to act more effectively to keep students in school and on track for success."

The event, held in Washington, DC, was moderated by **CNN special correspondent Frank Sesno** and featured a full day of speakers, starting with **Tim Russert, morning editor and moderator of *Meet the Press***. Russert delivered a moving opening speech that highlighted his own education path and talked about how his hometown schools are currently performing.

Youths' voices were a prominent feature of the day. One roundtable, hosted by **Sway Calloway, a correspondent for MTV News**, featured **Jynell Harrison, winner of MTV's "Be the Voice" competition**. Harrison, along with four other young adults (some of whom were on track to graduate, whereas others had already dropped out), described how out-of-school problems can distract young people from school. They talked about how "easy [it is] for a student to stray," the value of a positive community, and the importance of knowing that adults care about students as individuals and that they are willing to help them.

Another portion of the summit that featured youth was MTV's *The Dropout Chronicles*, a video that profiles three high school students, all on the brink of dropping out, and the challenges they face in finishing high school. (Video clips from *The Dropout Chronicles* are available at <http://www.mtv.com/thinkmtv/>). In contrast, a video about the Gates Foundation's early college high school efforts featured students whose school structure helped them see the relevance and possibilities associated with high school and college learning as well as to make college seem less daunting to them.

E.J. Dionne, syndicated columnist for the *Washington Post*, followed up by leading a panel that discussed the latest research on the dropout crisis and promising solutions to it. Chris Swanson, director of the EPE Research Center, announced the launch of a graduation mapping tool that can provide information at the district level about high school performance. **Russell Rumberger, a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara**, and **Robert Balfanz, a research scientist at Johns Hopkins University**, had similar messages. They emphasized that the dropout crisis is a solvable problem, that the research exists to guide change, and that the only thing missing is the political will to act. Balfanz also discussed a new resource guide titled *What You Can Do in Your Community*, which he described as a "roadmap or practical advice" on how interested individuals could start addressing the dropout crisis (The guide is available at <http://www.silentepidemic.org/pdfs/balfanz.pdf>.)

First Lady Laura Bush also spoke at the summit and noted the importance of literacy as a strong academic foundation for every other subject. She pointed out that the renewal of the No Child Left Behind Act offered an excellent opportunity to help older students who struggle to read at grade level, particularly through an expansion of the Striving Readers program.

A panel on “Dropout Communities of Hope” highlighted the work being done in Shelbyville, IN, Atlanta, and New York to turn the dropout problem around. As part of that panel, **Joel Klein, chancellor of the New York City Department of Education**, described recent progress in New York City and said that his goal was to see graduation rates rise 3 percent each year as well as to see other indicators improve.

David Broder, national political correspondent for the *Washington Post*, moderated a panel discussion among three governors, **Rhode Island Governor Donald Carcieri (R)**, **North Carolina Governor Michael Easley (D)**, and **New Hampshire Governor John Lynch (D)**, about dropout prevention efforts. The governors described programs underway in their states that were designed to increase graduation rates while also ensuring that students were engaged in rigorous course work that would prepare them for college, work, and life. They also focused the discussion on the economic imperative for these changes, noting that the United States’ competitive edge has been based on creativity and innovation.

To provide the federal perspective, **Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings** and **Senator Jeff Bingaman (D-NM)** spoke about the federal role in high school reform. Secretary Spellings noted Senator Bingaman’s leadership in making high schools a federal priority through his work on the America Competes Act and through his introduction (with **Senators Richard Burr (R-NC)** and **Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA)**) of the Graduation Promise Act, which she described as “a great step.” In his remarks, Senator Bingaman noted that 15 percent of the high schools produce nearly half of the nation’s dropouts. He said that the Graduation Promise Act would provide the resources needed to turn these schools around and improve student performance.

The event closed with remarks by **former Los Angeles Unified School District superintendent and former governor of Colorado Roy Romer**, who is currently the Strong American Schools’ “ED in ’08” Campaign Chairman. Romer encouraged participants to join the ED in ’08 campaign to make sure that education is a priority in our national conversation and in the next presidential election.

Visit <http://www.silentepidemic.org/summit/index.htm> for more information on the summit.

Melinda Gates Assesses Progress of Chicago High School Reform Efforts

In a recent TIME magazine article, **Melinda Gates, cochair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**, observed firsthand the daunting challenges and budding promise facing the urban high school reform efforts that the Gates Foundation currently funds. Accompanied by **Chicago Schools CEO Arne Duncan**, Gates visited students at three high schools on Chicago’s South Side. She complimented the city’s overall progress in combining a rigorous curriculum with coaching for teachers and additional student supports, noting that “when you have all those pieces in place, you have a chance to transform a school.”

The full TIME article, “On a Listening Tour with Melinda Gates,” is available at: <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1618468,00.html>.

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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