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Public Education Policy And Progress



THE GAP DEFINED: ACT Report Cites Poor State Standards and Assessments as Possible Reason for Gap Between Postsecondary Expectations and High School Practice

A new study by ACT finds a gap between what high schools are teaching in their core college preparatory courses and what postsecondary educators expect entering students to know in order for them to succeed in first-year courses. The report, *Aligning Postsecondary Expectations and High School Practice: The Gap Defined*, attributes the disconnect to unfocused state standards and state assessments that do not adequately measure what students need to know in college.

“There clearly is a significant gap between what high school teachers and college faculty expect of students,” said **Cynthia B. Schmeiser, president and chief operating officer of ACT’s education division**. “State policymakers and education leaders must work to close this gap by taking a more integrated approach to education and aligning their learning standards with college requirements.”

Currently, however, ACT argues that the “extensive demands” of state standards may be forcing high school teachers to treat all content topics as important, thereby sacrificing depth for breadth. In fact, according to the report, high school teachers across all subject areas (English/writing, reading, mathematics, and science) rate teaching their students advanced content as “important” or “very important.” But college instructors would rather see students arrive in postsecondary classes having gotten an in-depth understanding of the fundamentals of a subject area and strong basic skills.

For example, in writing, postsecondary instructors valued basic writing mechanics such as sentence structure and punctuation, while high school instructors ranked these skills as less important. In math, postsecondary instructors gave greater importance to understanding and rigorously applying fundamental principles, while high school teachers focused on advanced math content.

Postsecondary and high school teachers do concur on one issue: that students need better reading skills. Despite this agreement, however, the report points out that there is a “general lack of reading courses in high school” and a “decline in the teaching of targeted reading strategies after ninth grade.” As a solution, ACT recommends more instruction in reading and reading strategies throughout the high school years.

“All courses in high school, not just English and social studies but mathematics and science as well, must challenge students to read and understand complex texts,” the report reads. “Students

The Gap Defined

(Continued from p. 1)

... must be given more opportunities to read challenging materials across the curriculum so that they are better positioned to comprehend complex texts in all subjects once they enter college or the workplace.”

Another problem that stems from state standards that are not focused on what students need to know is that assessments designed to measure those standards will not focus on college readiness either. As a remedy, ACT suggests that states better target their standards to focus on the essential knowledge and skills in each content area, rather than trying to encapsulate a broad array of topics and skills. States should then align their assessments to these new standards and seek empirical evidence that their standards and assessments are “actually preparing and measuring student readiness for postsecondary work.”

Among its other solutions, the report suggests that states establish core course requirements for high school graduation and begin measuring college readiness in eighth grade and continue through the twelfth grade. It adds that colleges can provide data to high schools on how well their students are performing in college. In turn, high schools could use this data to improve the quality of their courses and identify the subject areas in which their graduates had difficulty once they got to college.

The complete report is available at <http://www.act.org/path/policy/reports/curriculum.html>.

Nine States Adopt Common Math Test; Are Voluntary National Standards the Next Step?

During a time when state standards are routinely faulted for their lack of rigor, a group of states have joined together to develop a common math test that could be one of the first steps on the road toward national education standards. Announced on April 10, the joint effort means that students in nine states—Arkansas, Kentucky, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island—will receive the same test in Algebra II and therefore will be expected to have the same understanding of the subject.

“This test demonstrates the ability of states to come together to establish consistent expectations for student achievement, anchored in the real-world demands students will face when they complete high school,” said **Dr. Ken James, commissioner of the Arkansas Department of Education**. “The test will allow us to compare performance across states and to drive consistent rigor and content in high school Algebra II courses. Most importantly, it will help us determine what works so we can adjust both the curriculum and instruction accordingly.”

Research has shown that Algebra II is one of several “gatekeeper” courses in high school that can predict future success in college. In fact, according to a February 2006 report from the U.S. Department of Education, high school students who complete Algebra II are twice as likely to earn a bachelor’s degree as those who do not.

The test will be first administered in May 2008 to approximately 200,000 students in the nine states. The other forty-one states will also be allowed to administer the test and join the partnership, which is an initiative of the American Diploma Project (ADP) Network. ADP is a group of twenty-nine states committed to preparing all students for college and work that was launched in 2004 by Achieve, Inc., in partnership with the Education Trust and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

More information on the common math test is available from the Achieve press release at <http://achieve.org/node/836>.

National Math and Science Institute Accepting Grants to Improve Student Achievement in Math and Science

The National Math and Science Institute (NMSI) is now accepting applications for two grant programs designed to improve American students' performance in math and science courses.

The first program will award grants of up to \$13 million to nonprofits in ten states to increase the number of students taking and succeeding on rigorous College Board Advanced Placement (AP) exams in mathematics, science, and English. Specifically, NMSI will award grants to replicate the work of Advanced Placement Strategies (APS) in other states. APS is a nonprofit organization that implements training and incentive programs for AP and pre-AP mathematics, science, and English courses.

The second project will award grants of up to \$2.4 million to ten nonprofit institutions of higher education to start UTeach-type programs. UTeach, developed at the University of Texas at Austin, is designed to attract mathematics, science, and computer science undergraduates to the teaching profession. It allows students to graduate in four years with teacher certification and a BS degree in mathematics or science. The program currently certifies more than seventy teachers per year, and 92 percent go on immediately to teach secondary math and science.

Launched in March, NMSI addresses the declining number of students who are prepared for and who take rigorous college courses in mathematics and science. NMSI was created in response to the National Academies' 2005 report, *Rising Above the Gathering Storm*, which said that improving American students' performance in math and science course work is the most effective way to increase the United States' global competitiveness. This project was initiated as a partnership of private donors, led by ExxonMobil, which committed \$125 million toward the effort.

"The National Academies set forth a clear path for the nation to improve math and science education for our country's youth and it is now time for us to act," said **Tom Luce, CEO of the National Math and Science Initiative and former assistant secretary for planning, evaluation, and policy development at the U.S. Department of Education**. "NMSI will broadly implement two proven programs in states across the nation in an effort to support the next generation of innovators."

More information about how to apply for the two grant programs is available at <http://www.nationalmathandscience.org/>.



EXPERT TEACHER PANEL ADVOCATES MERIT PAY FOR TEACHERS: New Report Outlines a New Framework for Teacher Compensation

The single-salary schedule for teachers is an idea whose time has passed. Instead, the nation should embrace a "carefully crafted performance-pay system" that will reward teachers for raising student achievement. So says a coalition of eighteen expert teachers whose findings were published in *Performance-Pay for Teachers: Designing a System that Students Deserve*. The teachers, who include National Board-certified teachers, several state teachers of the year, winners of the Milken National Educator of the Year Award, Presidential Award recipients, and a National Outstanding Young Educator of the Year Award winner, were brought together by the Center for Teaching Quality, which published the report under the name TeacherSolutions.

"In a new era, with challenges and opportunities before us that were unimaginable in post-World War II America, our public schools need a far more nuanced approach to professional compensation—an approach that acknowledges teaching quality as our best guarantee of student achievement," the report reads. "We have come together as a TeacherSolutions team because we are united in our belief that teachers need to be paid differently. We agree that a carefully crafted

Expert Teacher Panel Advocates Merit Pay for Teachers

(Continued from p. 3)

performance-pay system has huge potential to transform the teaching profession in ways that can help all students learn more.”

In the report, the authors present a ten-point framework for new teacher compensation in which base pay would still be tied to experience, but teachers could earn more through a variety of incentives as they progress from “novice” to “professional” to “expert.” They recommend that the performance-pay system be open to all teachers rather than being limited to teachers who only teach certain subjects such as reading and math. In addition, the report favors pay-for-performance plans that reward student gains over time instead of a single score on a standardized test. In an example included in the report, a teacher in Wake County, NC, would earn a base salary of between \$30,000 for a novice and \$70,000 for an expert and could earn up to \$130,000 a year if certain incentives are reached.

The framework described in the report would provide additional pay for additional degrees and professional development, but only when that training is tied to the school’s or district’s goals for boosting student achievement. For example, a teacher with a master’s degree in educational administration would not be rewarded if the local priority is to raise student achievement among English language learners.

Similarly, the structure would offer incentives to teachers who want to teach in high-need, low-performing schools, but only if they are qualified. “Sending a willing but unqualified or underprepared teacher to such a school could do more harm than good,” the report reads. Lastly, instead of rewarding seniority, the framework would emphasize “leadership,” which it defines as teachers who take on additional responsibilities, such as mentoring new teachers or serving on advisory councils.

The authors also stress the importance of flexibility at the local level and teacher buy-in when teacher pay-for-performance plans are being developed. They suggest that schools and districts need to be able to distribute incentive funds in ways that advance their specific student-learning goals. In addition, they recommend that schools and districts invite teachers with a track record of success in the classroom to be partners in compensation redesign.

In developing their recommendations, the panel of teachers examined pay-for-performance plans in Denver and Minneapolis and incorporated some components from those plans into their framework. They also expressed concern that other performance-pay systems that are now in development will not translate into the increased student achievement. Specifically, they mention Florida’s Special Teachers Are Rewarded (STAR) plan and call it “fatally flawed,” in part because only one in four teachers is eligible for any performance bonuses.¹

¹ Last month, the Florida legislature replaced the STAR program with a merit award program that would give school districts more flexibility in how many teachers are rewarded and why. Unlike STAR, the merit award program would also allow teacher unions and schools districts to work together to set up local proposals. More information is available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2007/03/28/29florida.h26.html>.

The authors also consider the recently enacted Teacher Incentive Fund, a federal program that rewards teachers and principals for raising student achievement. In regard to the program, they say that they are “hopeful” about its potential but are concerned that some policymakers and administrators will invest the funds into compensation approaches that “repeat the mistakes of the past,” which include programs that limit rewards to teachers who teach certain subjects or that place an artificial cap on the number of teachers who can participate in a performance-pay program.

They also recognize that some of their peers are lukewarm, at best, to the idea of differentiated pay but blame previous pay-for-performance plans that were either administered improperly or ran into other problems.

“If [some teachers] hesitate to embrace most of the current plans being proposed by political and business leaders, it should be read as understandable caution born of long experience,” the report reads. “The checkered history of differentiated pay has been characterized by administrators who did not have the tools to judge good teaching, by makeshift student and teacher information systems that yielded untrustworthy data, and by implementation goals that far outstripped the dollars and technical know-how available to support them.”

One group that has taken a strong stance against performance-pay systems is the National Education Association (NEA), which represents about two-thirds of the nation’s public school teachers and prefers higher salaries for all teachers over merit pay. “Paying teachers based on the test results of their students has failed for many reasons,” **NEA President Reg Weaver** said when talking about the Teacher Incentive Fund. “Students learn best when teachers work as a team, not as free agents competing for a financial reward.”

The complete report is available at <http://www.teacherleaders.org/teachersolutions/index.php>.

Movement Underway in Texas to Substitute Pay-for-Performance with Salary Increase for All Teachers

Proponents of merit pay suffered a setback last month when the Texas House of Representatives chose to put money that would have funded a teacher merit pay program into an across-the-board raise for teachers and other school workers. The decision occurred during debate on the state’s two-year budget and marked a victory for teacher groups who argued against merit pay.

“We’re delighted all teachers are getting a pay raise,” **Brock Gregg of the Association of Texas Professional Educators** told the *Dallas Morning News*. “The Legislature is using this money in the way it should’ve been used in the first place. Instead of basing salaries on test scores, they’re now going to give teachers the raise they deserve.”

The amendment by **Representative Rick Noriega (D-Houston)** was adopted by a vote of 90–56; the pay raise for teachers, school counselors, librarians, and nurses will take effect on September 1 if it is approved by the Senate. However, it may run into opposition there, as **Texas Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst (R)** and other leaders strongly back the merit pay program, which was approved in a special session last year and is only now beginning to take effect.

“Teacher merit pay is rejected” is available at <http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/education/stories/033007dntexbudget.3975211.html>.



BEATING THE ODDS: New Report Shows Improvement in Math and Reading Among Urban Schools

The nation's urban schools continue to make important gains in math and reading scores on state assessments, according to a new report released by the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) on April 11. In total, the report, *Beating the Odds: A City-by-City Analysis of Student Performance and Achievement Gaps on State Assessments*, finds that students in sixty-seven major city school systems in thirty-seven states posted “substantially higher test scores” in 2006 than in 2002 in fourth- and eighth-grade mathematics and reading on state assessments.

“The data not only show consistent gains over the past several years, but a more complete picture of progress in urban schools is emerging,” said **Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of Great City Schools**, a coalition of sixty-seven of the nation's largest urban public school systems.

While the gains are a positive sign, they also serve as a reminder of how much more improvement is needed—especially when judged against state averages or the requirement in the No Child Left Behind Act that all students reach proficiency.

According to the report, the percentage of fourth graders who are proficient in reading has grown from 43 percent in 2002 to 55 percent in 2006. In addition, math scores for the same group of students increased by a “whopping” 15 points, from 44 percent in 2002 to 59 percent in 2006, the report notes. Although the gap has narrowed in past years, city scores continue to trail the state averages in fourth grade reading (67 percent) and math (72 percent).

Scores are also on the rise at the eighth-grade level, with 42 percent of students scoring at or above the proficient level in reading in 2006, and 46 percent reaching the proficient level in math, increases of 8 and 11 points, respectively. Again, however, the city averages trail the state averages of 60 percent in reading and 61 percent in math, although the gap has narrowed in recent years.

The report also finds that many urban districts have been able to narrow the achievement gap between white and minority students since 2000. In math, 60 percent of Great City School districts narrowed the achievement gap between white and African-American eighth graders and 53 percent narrowed the gap between white and Hispanic eighth graders. In reading, 67 percent of Great City School districts narrowed the achievement gap between white and African-American students while 60 percent narrowed the gap between white and Hispanic students.

For the first time, the report also measures the progress of fourth- and eight-grade students who scored below the basic levels in math and reading. In math, the percentage of urban eighth graders who scored “below basic” decreased from 30 percent in 2002 to 26 percent in 2006. In reading, the percentage of urban eighth-grade students who scored “below basic” decreased from 29 percent in 2002 to 25 percent in 2006.

“Urban schools are clearly increasing the numbers of students scoring above proficiency levels and decreasing the numbers at the lowest, contributing to overall progress where America wants it most,” Casserly said.

The report measures schools only by how they fare against state standards—some of which have drawn criticism for being watered down. As the report notes, there is no national assessment system that allows one to compare one state to another, nor do all states disaggregate results for individual student groups. However, the CGCS says in its report that it is “trying to address this weakness through the Trial Urban District Assessment of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and by advocating for national standards in reading, math, and science.”

The report adds that the overall direction of state numbers is consistent with the most recent estimates from the NAEP tests. It notes that math achievement in the cities has improved by “significant margins” in both fourth- and eighth-grades on NAEP and that reading in the cities is improving at the fourth-grade level.

“It is clear ... that student achievement in the Great City Schools is improving,” the report reads. “The data suggest that gains are possible on a large scale—not just school-by-school. It is now time to determine how the pace of improvement can be accelerated.”

The complete report is available at <http://www.cgcs.org/publications/achievement.aspx>.

National Academy of Education Launches Pre-Doctoral Fellowship Program in Adolescent Literacy

The National Academy of Education (NAEd) has created a new pre-doctoral fellowship program to support doctoral research on adolescent literacy. Launched with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York, the program was designed to “strengthen and stimulate adolescent literacy education by infusing the field with highly talented, well-trained, and motivated researchers and teacher educators.”

“Improving adolescents’ literacy skills will require building a robust cadre of scholars focused on these issues,” said **Catherine Snow, a professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and chair of the pre-doctoral fellowship program’s oversight committee.** “Junior scholars supported by these new funds and working with experienced mentors will take work on adolescent literacy to a new and higher level.”

The program will accept twenty individuals for two-year fellowships. Individuals who are accepted into the program will each receive a stipend of \$25,000, which will be disbursed over a period of up to two years. The stipend will support them in finalizing their dissertation proposals, designing and conducting rigorous research, analyzing their data, and writing up their dissertation research results.

Fellowship applications and additional information will be available after June 1, at <http://www.naeducation.org>. Applications will be accepted through December 1, 2007.

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 secondary school students to achieve high standards.



ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

1201 Connecticut Ave., NW
Suite 901
Washington, DC 20036

Phone 202 828-0828
Fax 202 828-0821
Alliance@all4ed.org
www.all4ed.org

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Bob Wise
President

Jason Amos
Editor

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In this issue:

- *The Gap Defined*: ACT Report Cites Poor State Standards and Assessments as Possible Reason for Gap Between Postsecondary Expectations and High School Practice
- Expert Teacher Panel Advocates Merit Pay for Teachers: New Report Outlines a New Framework for Teacher Compensation
- *Beating the Odds*: New Report Shows Improvement in Math and Reading Among Urban Schools



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