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Public Education Policy And Progress



## **FROM NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND TO EVERY CHILD A GRADUATE: New Alliance Report Outlines Policy Framework for Improving America's Secondary Schools**

In 2002, the Alliance for Excellent Education published *Every Child a Graduate*, one of the first nationally focused efforts to draw attention to the problems in many of the country's middle and high schools and encourage federal—as well as state and local—policy reform designed to improve student achievement and attainment.

Since that report's release, the need to reform America's middle and high schools has grown even more urgent. Today, only about one third of the students who enter ninth grade each year can expect to graduate four years later having learned what they need to be prepared for postsecondary education or the workforce. Another third will graduate, but without the knowledge and skills necessary for success in college, career training, or entry-level jobs. And the final third will drop out of school before graduation day.

A few of the nation's high schools are educating all of their students well. Many more are doing a good job of providing a good education to some of their students but allowing others to fall through the cracks. And about two thousand (12 percent) of the country's high schools produce about half of the nation's dropouts.

These and other problems with the nation's secondary schools are chronicled in *From No Child Left Behind to Every Child a Graduate*, a new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education. The good news is that since 2002, the knowledge base that informs what is known about both the problems in America's secondary schools and the ways to solve them has grown dramatically, thanks to the efforts of researchers and educators across the country.

*From No Child Left Behind to Every Child a Graduate* presents a new framework for action to improve secondary schools that is based on this expanded pool of research and predicated on the recognition that, to be effective, reform must be comprehensive and systemic. The new framework reflects the consensus among educators, researchers, policymakers, and other authorities on the specific problems of secondary schools, as well as on the research- and best-practice-supported solutions to those problems.

“Much is already known about how to improve the secondary educational system, and more is being discovered every day,” the report reads. “The nation can begin now to transform all of the nation's middle and high schools into effective centers of teaching and learning. The process will be neither easy nor fast. But the research-based solutions and best practices that have been and

## *From No Child Left Behind to Every Child a Graduate*

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are being developed and demonstrated in pockets of excellence around the nation prove that success is possible if the will to effect comprehensive and sustained reform is present.”

Noting that there are no “silver bullets,” the report outlines three principles that must guide decisionmakers in their attempts to create effective policy change at the high school level. First, that all students be held to high expectations that will allow them to graduate ready for college and the modern workplace. Second, that the system support and leverage an effective and individualized approach at the student and school levels. And finally, that educators and policymakers be provided with the data and research necessary to make informed decisions to improve policy and practice.

According to the report, the seven policy areas contained within the framework offer a comprehensive and systemic approach to secondary school reform. The first component, **alignment and rigor**, would address the fact that many state standards are not aligned to college and work readiness and to the needs of globalization. Instead, the report calls for “high, common expectations for every student by ensuring that standards, curriculum, assessments, and accountability systems are aligned with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in college and the workplace and as a citizen.”

The second element is valid **high school accountability systems** that are designed to measure student and system performance, foster good practice and mitigate bad practice, and identify and direct resources and reforms to improve teaching, learning, and outcomes for all students. According to the report, the current federal high school accountability policy under the No Child Left Behind Act is made up of a system of arbitrary deadlines, inconsistent goals, unreliable standards, and tests that vary across the states.

Noting that neither high schools nor their students benefit from a one-size-fits-all approach, the report recommends **student supports and options** that provide all high school students with access to a variety of educational models, technology that supports different learning styles and needs, and interventions designed to help students who are struggling with specific skills or subjects. And in response to the challenges related to recruiting, training, and retaining effective secondary school educators, the report outlines several solutions that the federal government can take to ensure that students have **highly effective educators** and **supportive communities** that can provide every student with the academic and nonacademic supports necessary for academic success.

The report also calls on the federal government to help students with **college access** by ensuring that all students have sufficient academic preparation, an understanding of what is needed financially and academically to be accepted into college, and the financial support necessary to succeed in postsecondary education and in the workforce.

Finally, the report notes that there is relatively little **federal investment** in the nation’s secondary schools. Rather, federal education funding supports the bookends of the education system—pre-K–6 on one end and higher education on the other. The report calls on the federal

government to drive financial and human resources to where they are needed most by ensuring that those resources are allocated equitably and adequately and are used efficiently and effectively.

“The United States faces a stark choice,” the report reads. “It can do nothing to fundamentally change the way it educates its students and thus continue an educational decline that will inevitably lead to a weaker nation with a lower standard of living. Or it can summon its collective resources to face this challenge head on, with smart solutions and adequate resources, to place the nation on a trajectory toward a thriving national economy and a vibrant society for all of its citizens.”

The complete report is available at [http://www.all4ed.org/publication\\_material/reports/ECAG](http://www.all4ed.org/publication_material/reports/ECAG).



***DROPOUTS, DIPLOMAS, AND DOLLARS: Alliance Report Estimates Current Cost of Dropouts and Future Impact if Status Quo Continues***

The United States can no longer absorb the costs and losses associated with an education system that already produces more than 1.2 million dropouts every year. So says *Dropouts, Diplomas, and Dollars: U.S. High Schools and the Nation’s Economy*, another new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education, which declares that the situation in America’s high schools is “nothing short of a crisis” but is “largely ignored by the media and the public.” The report seeks to help all Americans—whether they have a direct connection with schools or not—understand their personal stake in ensuring that every child becomes a high school graduate, prepared for success in college, the modern workplace, and life.

According to the report, students’ chances of graduating from high school vary widely depending on where students go to school, their gender, and their racial and ethnic background. For example, the report notes a wide variation in national graduation rates for African American, Hispanic, and American Indian students, who tend to have much lower rates than their white or Asian American peers. However, these discrepancies are even larger at the state level. In Iowa, for instance, white students graduate at a rate of 84.8 percent, whereas African American (58.6 percent) and Hispanic (54 percent) students trail by more than 25 percentage points. The report describes similar graduation rate gaps across counties and within cities and school districts.

Fifty years ago, the United States could afford to lose large numbers of students before graduation because those dropouts could still land well-paying jobs and support their families. Today, however, individuals who fail to earn a high school diploma are at a great disadvantage when it comes to finding a good-paying job because many of the jobs once open to high school dropouts have moved overseas or have become automated.

Additionally, many of the manufacturing jobs that once offered attractive options for high school dropouts now require increasingly higher levels of education and training. For example, the report notes that whereas only 12 percent of manufacturing workers had any college education in 1973, that number is now more than 36 percent. Without attractive options for employment, high school dropouts often turn to other options such as unemployment benefits, social welfare assistance, and even crime.

## *Dropouts, Diplomas, and Dollars*

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The report lists many other disadvantages that high school dropouts face compared to individuals who receive a diploma. For example, it notes that dropouts are generally less healthy, die earlier, and are more likely to become parents when very young. According to the report, even more tragic, the children of high school dropouts are more likely to become high school dropouts themselves, as are their children's children, and so on.

Clearly, the dropouts themselves suffer the most direct impact. But the report demonstrates that the economy, social fabric, and security of the nation, states, and local communities are also affected. The opportunities that these youths will miss throughout their lives will have cumulative costs for them as individuals and also represent a significant lost opportunity for the country. According to the report, a single high school dropout costs the nation approximately \$260,000 in lost earnings, taxes, and productivity over the course of his or her lifetime. So, if the students who dropped out of the Class of 2008 had graduated, the nation's economy would have benefited from an additional \$319 billion in income over their lifetimes. The report includes additional savings from decreased spending on crime, health care, and college remediation.

Looking ahead, the report finds that the challenge associated with high school dropouts is unlikely to diminish. "The world will continue to change, and good jobs will require even higher levels of education," it reads. "And the retirement of the baby boom generation will create even more demand for new well-educated candidates to replace them in the workforce."

Another factor that the report says will influence the future of the nation's economy is the country's increasing racial and ethnic diversity. It notes that, in the coming decades, the labor force is expected to become even more diverse than it is now, as minorities, with higher population growth through immigration, higher fertility rates, and higher labor force participation rates, are projected to expand their proportion of the workforce considerably.

But currently, only 57.8 percent of Hispanic, 55.3 percent of African American, and 50.6 percent of Native American students graduate on time, compared to 77.6 percent of white students. If minority groups continue to grow larger as a percentage of the population, as predicted, and if their low graduation rates remain the same, the report finds that the national graduation rate will begin to fall as a growing number of minority students are left behind. Already, minority students account for more than half of the nation's dropouts even though they make up less than half of the nation's total public school population.

On the other hand, the report says that if high schools and colleges were able to 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 across the nation would add, conservatively, more than \$310 billion to the U.S. economy.

"The stunning potential economic benefit to the nation and the states of improving outcomes for academically underserved youth through improved schooling should be a wake-up call," the report reads. "The importance of reforming America's high schools cannot be understated; the nation truly needs the economic and social contributions these young people can make. The realities of global competitiveness, the rapidly diminishing prospects of those students whose

high schools fail to prepare them for college and work, and the resulting widening opportunity gap all make high school reform an imperative from an economic, national security, and civil rights perspective.”

The complete report is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/Econ2008.pdf>.

### **United States to be “Majority-Minority” by 2050, According to New Analysis**

By 2050, less than 50 percent of the U.S. population will be non-Hispanic white, making the United States a “majority-minority” country, according to a recent analysis by the Population Reference Bureau (PRB). The analysis finds that racial minorities currently account for about one third of the U.S. population but are expected to reach 50 percent by 2050. About 10 percent of the more than 3,100 counties in the United States have already reached majority-minority status.

By examining the racial and ethnic composition of youth, the authors, **Kelvin Pollard, senior demographer at PRB**, and **Mark Mather, associate vice president for domestic programs at PRB**, were able to predict what the U.S. working-age population might look like in twenty years. Currently, 43 percent of people under age twenty are racial and ethnic minorities. In addition, the authors find that minorities make up at least 40 percent of the youth population in nearly one of every four counties nationwide. “In the coming years, economic conditions could deteriorate in counties with growing minority concentrations unless opportunities in these areas improve,” they write.

According to the analysis, majority-minority counties are found in all parts of the country but are highly concentrated in the Southeast, the Southwest (especially along the Mexican border), central and southern California, parts of the rural Great Plains, most of Alaska, and Hawaii. They also find that these counties come in all types, “from large counties in major metropolitan areas (such as the Bronx in New York City) to small rural counties (such as Todd County in South Dakota).”

The complete analysis is available at <http://prb.org/Articles/2008/majority-minority.aspx>.



### **“CLOSING CRACKS IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM”:** New Alliance Brief Describes Use of Early-Warning Data to Prevent Dropouts

Anecdotal evidence and national statistics show that educational outcomes for poor and minority children are generally worse than that of their peers, but they do not explain why. Fortunately, recent research has identified consistent academic factors that more accurately predict whether or not a student is likely to drop out. “Using Early-Warning Data to Improve Graduation Rates: Closing Cracks in the Education System,” a new brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education, explores the predictive power of early-warning data and discusses policies that can support these efforts. It also examines efforts underway in places such as Boston, Chicago, and Louisiana to build early-warning data systems and to apply the information strategically to guide secondary school interventions across the country.

“When a car’s warning light goes on, we immediately seek help,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Many students heading back to school this month are already showing warning signs that require immediate action. Dropping out is not inevitable. The sooner we can use academic data to identify at-risk students early in their education, and then use the same data to meet their needs, the more likely they are to stay in school and graduate. The good news is that we can; the urgent news is that we must.”

## “Closing Cracks in the Education System”

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According to the brief, many dropouts share a number of academic characteristics. For example, students who drop out have usually received a failing grade in core courses (especially in math or English), earned a low grade point average (GPA), or scored low on achievement tests. They were often retained a grade because they had not earned enough credits to be promoted and, as a result, were often older than the other students in their class. Furthermore, as demonstrated by low attendance rates and disciplinary problems, these students were frequently not engaged in their education or aware of its importance to future opportunities.

When analyzed in combination, these academic characteristics can provide strong indications of which students are at risk of becoming dropouts. The brief notes several studies that have been able to accurately predict as many as 80 percent of future dropouts by using these indicators.

However, simply identifying at-risk students does nothing to mitigate their risk factors and help them graduate. Instead, as the brief notes, “the power of early-warning indicators lies in the willingness and capacity of school leaders and educators to transform insightful data into strategic decisionmaking that leads to improved student outcomes.” Therefore, while educators cannot change a student’s socioeconomic status, they can certainly work to prevent students from accumulating the academic risk factors of dropping out, and for students who do fall off track, strategically target their unique academic challenges.

The brief also describes how early-warning data can help decisionmakers at the school and district levels. First, early-warning data can be used to better understand the nature of the academic problems in low-performing secondary schools and to unearth systemic weaknesses and enable schools and districts to address them. Second, early-warning data can be used in real-time to assess the effectiveness of strategies in a timely manner. Third, early-warning data provides a way to demonstrate whether an entire school is on track to improving graduation rates. Lastly, easy-to-understand early-warning data can be a powerful tool for garnering support from key stakeholders—including students, parents, and community members—for needed interventions.

In addition to examining how early-warning data can help inform decisions, the brief outlines policies that can support their implementation. It argues that while the real test for using early-warning data exists at the school level, there is much that policymakers and external partners can do to ensure that schools have the time, expertise, and technological tools to analyze and communicate student data, select indicators and triggers, identify at-risk students, and train and support school staff to maximize the power of these systems.

The brief argues that “partners and policymakers at all levels can—and must—play valuable roles in the development and use of early-warning data systems to improve student outcomes.” Some actions it suggests include creating the infrastructure to predict future dropouts, building capacity to implement early-warning and intervention systems, and bringing efforts to scale.

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



## REFRESHER COURSE: Report Finds that a Third of Community College Freshmen Enrolling from High School Need Remediation

Almost one third of the students who were seniors in high school in 2004 and who enrolled in community college that fall took at least one remedial course during their first year of college, states a recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics.

The report, *Community Colleges: A Special Supplement to the Condition of Education 2008*, examines the educational attainment of Class of 2004 high school seniors and compares students who enrolled in two-year postsecondary schools to those who chose four-year schools. It finds that 63 percent of the seniors were “immediate enrollees,” starting postsecondary education directly after high school, with roughly one third of that total enrolled in community colleges.

A significant share of all students—but particularly those attending community colleges—were underprepared for the course work. Whereas 19 percent of immediate enrollees in public and 15 percent of those attending private, not-for-profit four-year colleges took at least one remedial course, 29 percent of those attending community college did so.

The report cites a couple of probable reasons for this occurrence, among them the “open admission” policies of many two-year institutions—meaning that students neither compete for entry into the school nor are required to display a certain level of academic proficiency to enroll. Additionally, some states no longer offer remedial courses at their public four-year institutions, forcing students to take remedial courses at community colleges. The report’s authors warn that readers should interpret these percentages as low-end estimates because they only account for classes taken during the students’ first year and are based on reports from students, who may not recognize a class as being remedial.

The report also notes that students in the Class of 2004 who were more academically successful were also more likely to enroll in four-year schools than in two-year schools. Indicators examined include students’ grade point averages—whether they were above, at, or below 2.5 (C plus), standardized math scores, and whether or not they took advanced courses in math, science, or foreign languages.

“These data suggest that many 2004 immediate enrollees in community colleges were students with a high school GPA of C+ or above but who lacked mathematics coursework beyond algebra II, foreign language coursework beyond year 2, or both,” the report states.

For *Community Colleges: A Special Supplement to the Condition of Education 2008*’s findings on community college students in general and its comparison of two-year versus four-year schools, download the report at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2008033>.

***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.



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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Public Education Policy And Progress

Volume 8 No. 16: September 8, 2008

**Bob Wise**  
President

**Jason Amos**  
Editor

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First Class Mail  
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**PAID**  
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Dulles, VA

## Volume 8 No. 16: September 8, 2008

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