



# Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **NEW WAIVE: U.S. Department of Education Outlines Procedure for NCLB Waiver Renewals, Includes New Requirements Around Graduation Rates, Teacher Quality, School Turnaround**

In September 2011, with the U.S. Congress unable to pass legislation to rewrite and renew the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—currently known as No Child Left Behind—President Obama outlined a plan to provide states with waivers from specific provisions of the law in exchange for state-led reform efforts to close achievement gaps, evaluate teachers and principals, promote rigorous accountability, and ensure that all students are on track to graduate ready for college and a career. Since then, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) has approved waiver requests from forty-one states and the District of Columbia.

On August 29, ED announced that thirty-four states<sup>1</sup> and the District of Columbia—places where ESEA waivers will expire at the end of School Year (SY) 2013–14—can request a two-year renewal to extend the waivers through the end of SY 2015–16.

“America’s most sweeping education law—the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind—is outmoded and constrains state and district efforts for innovation and reform. The smartest way to fix that is through a reauthorized ESEA law, but Congress has not agreed on a responsible bill,” [said U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan](#). “Therefore, the federal government has worked with states to develop waiver agreements that unleash local leaders’ energy for change and ensure equity, protect the most vulnerable students, and encourage standards that keep America competitive. The waiver renewal process announced [on August 29] will support states in continuing positive change and ensuring all children receive a high-quality education—but I look forward to a day when we can announce a new ESEA law that supports every state.”

According to [guidance released by ED](#), states seeking a renewal must (1) describe how the state will continue to meet the original requirements for receiving a waiver; (2) demonstrate that the waivers have been effective in enabling the state to carry out the activities for which the waivers were requested; (3) show that waivers have contributed to improved student achievement; and (4) explain how an extension is in the public’s best interest.

The guidance clarifies requirements regarding graduation rates, including a requirement that states use the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate to a significant degree in state-developed

<sup>1</sup> The thirty-four states eligible for a renewal are: Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin.

system of differentiated recognition, accountability, and support, including using graduation rate targets for all students and for all subgroups to drive incentives, interventions, and support in all other Title I schools. In addition, the guidance requires states to provide interventions and support for low-achieving students in Title I schools when one or more subgroups miss graduation rate goals or annual targets over a number of years. This policy is particularly important in order to address the Alliance’s finding in its recent report, [\*The Effect of ESEA Waiver Plans on High School Graduation Rate Accountability\*](#), that eleven states with waivers have either no or minimal accountability for subgroup graduation rates.

The guidance also contains new language on teacher quality, including a requirement that states use effectiveness data from teacher and principal evaluation systems to ensure that low-income students and students of color are not taught by inexperienced, ineffective, or out-of-field teachers at higher rates than other students. It also requires that federally funded professional development be evidence-based and used to deepen educators’ knowledge of college- and career-ready standards and the instructional practices, curricula, and high-quality assessments tied to those standards. Additionally, states must provide a high-quality plan to turn around priority schools in SYs 2014–15 and 2015–16 and explain how they will identify future priority schools.

All requests for renewal of ESEA flexibility must be received no later than February 21, 2014. If a state’s renewal request is not renewed, the state and the school district must resume complying with all ESEA requirements by the beginning of SY 2014–15.

Additional guidance from ED is available at

<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/esea-flexibility/flex-renewal/index.html>.



### **MAINTAINING A FOCUS ON SUBGROUPS: NCLB Waivers Could Hinder Subgroup Accountability and Commitment to Closing Achievement Gaps, Finds New CHSE Report**

The Obama administration’s policy of allowing states to request waivers from key provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—currently known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB)—“raises serious concerns about whether traditional subgroups of students will continue to receive the attention and support they need in order to graduate high school ready for college and career,” according to a new report from the Campaign for High School Equity (CHSE), a diverse coalition of national civil rights and education organizations representing communities of color. Findings from the report, *Maintaining a Focus on Subgroups in an Era of Elementary and Secondary Education Act Waivers*, are based on CHSE’s analysis of thirty-five waiver applications that were approved as of April 2013.

“While the intent of the policy is to support state leadership and innovation in the design of their accountability systems, the great risk for these students is that the complexity and individual variation of the state waiver plans greatly diminishes the clarity and transparency of the accountability system under NCLB,” the report notes. “This makes it very difficult for policymakers, educators, parents and the public to understand and monitor how accountability is serving to identify the needs of these students and to trigger necessary interventions for them.”

Although the report states that NCLB did not go far enough to close “persistent and troubling” gaps in graduation rates, it calls the law’s attention to the progress of at-risk student subgroups,

including students of color, Native, English language learners (ELLs), and low-income students, a “hallmark of federal education policy and a critical tool for giving parents, communities, and other stakeholders the information they need to help improve schools in every community.”

Under the waivers granted by the Obama administration, however, some states have been permitted to “abandon a primary focus on subgroup accountability” and “weaken efforts to close achievement gaps and improve education for all students.” Whereas the low academic achievement of a single subgroup triggered an intervention under NCLB, the report notes that approved waiver plans in several states use subgroup data to “inform intervention, but may not trigger it.”

“Reporting is important, but it is no substitute for strong accountability. Transparency and robust parameters are essential to achieving equity in education,” said **Rufina Hernández, executive director of CHSE.**

The report explores trends in state accountability systems under ESEA waivers and raises concerns in five specific areas: super subgroups; annual measurable objectives; “n-size,” which is a state-established threshold of the number of students in a subgroup at a school that is used accountability purposes; identification of schools in need of improvement; and supports and interventions.

The report calls on the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to oversee and require modifications to state accountability policies if states are inadequately addressing the performance of subgroups and makes recommendations on how ED can (1) drive improved subgroup achievement; (2) ensure transparency; (3) monitor states’ annual measurable objectives; (4) engage diverse stakeholders; and (5) lower n-size.

And for states, to ensure the best results for students of color, the report recommends the following core principles that states should adhere to as they implement ESEA waiver plans:

- Data disaggregation
- Accountability systems with a primary focus on student academic achievement
- Report cards that are clear, concise, and understandable
- Engagement of communities of color
- Plans to build school and district capacity
- Support for low-performing schools and subgroups

*Maintaining a Focus on Subgroups in an Era of Elementary and Secondary Education Act Waivers* is available at [http://www.highschoolequity.org/images/WaiversReport\\_R8.pdf](http://www.highschoolequity.org/images/WaiversReport_R8.pdf).



### **COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS 101: New Alliance Report Lays Out Facts on the Common Core State Standards**

While forty-six states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), approximately two-thirds of Americans say they have never heard of them, according to recent results from the [PDK/Gallup Poll](#). To better inform the public about the standards while also addressing the many misimpressions surrounding them, the Alliance for

Excellent Education released a new report, *Common Core State Standards 101*. The report examines how the states originated and developed the CCSS initiative and how to ensure that the standards deliver on their promise to fundamentally improve the quality of teaching and learning in the United States.

“The Common Core State Standards have been beset by fear-mongering and scare tactics that divert attention from the positive impact the standards can have for all students,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “This new Alliance report properly recognizes the development by states of the Common Core State Standards as truly a watershed moment in American education and dispels incorrect notions surrounding the standards’ development, adoption, and implementation.”

The CCSS spell out the knowledge and skills in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics that all students should know and be able to do at each grade level from kindergarten through grade twelve. At the same time, the CCSS leave all decisions about the curriculum and teaching practices for meeting the standards to local districts and schools.

The report explains that the CCSS are a product of a twenty-year effort that began in 1989. With no federal participation, the standard-setting process reached a milestone in 2009 when forty-eight governors and state chiefs accepted the formal invitation of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to participate in an effort to develop common standards in ELA and mathematics. The report stresses that the state-led standards-writing process was transparent, with the panels writing the standards soliciting input from state officials and incorporating feedback on drafts from more than 10,000 educators and members of the public.

The report acknowledges that the federal government, through its Race to the Top program, influenced the *timing* of some state adoptions, but not their actual decision to adopt the standards, a finding confirmed by subsequent surveys of state officials. “States were eager to support the standards, and the federal government, which had no role in the development of the standards, was eager to back the states,” the report notes.

Focusing on political challenges and other resistance to the CCSS, the report notes that most opposition is based on “misimpressions” of the standards. And while significant media attention has focused on recent state legislation that would repeal or slow implementation of the new standards, the report points out that the “vast majority” of the approximately 150 CCSS-related bills introduced during the 2013 legislation session were related to supporting implementation.

The report also considers the costs of the CCSS, including those associated with training teachers, developing and purchasing new materials, and implementing new tests. It points to research finding that states can save money by using technology and open resources, and by taking advantage of the economies of scale and cross-state opportunities the CCSS provide.

Stressing that standards alone cannot transform teaching and learning, the report examines implementation efforts underway in several states to help teachers shift their instruction to reflect the new standards. Most prominent of these efforts is the work by two assessment consortia—the

Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, a group of nineteen states and the District of Columbia, and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, a group of twenty-five states—to develop tools to help teachers assess student progress during the year, and end-of-year assessments aligned with the new standards that will represent a significant improvement over current state tests.

Finally, the report highlights four key elements to effective implementation of the CCSS, including (1) cost-effective assessments; (2) integration with other reforms, such as new teacher evaluation systems; (3) sufficient support for teachers, including curriculum and instructional tools; and (4) sufficient support for students, including additional instruction time and resources.

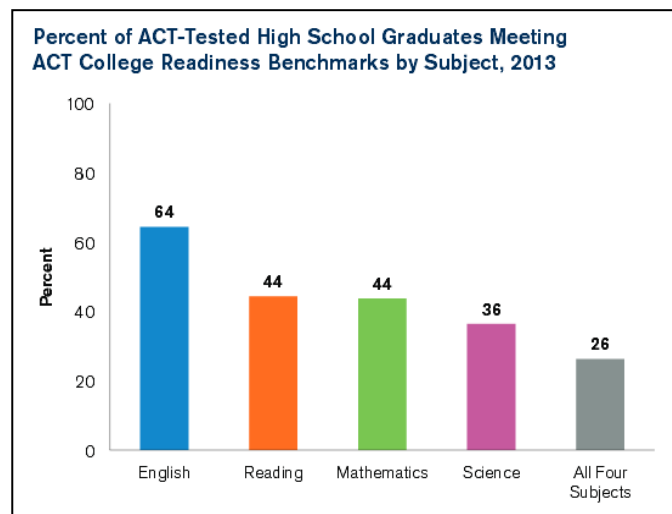
“As state officials made clear when they developed and adopted the Common Core State Standards, previous academic standards varied widely between states and even school districts—a situation that was unfair to all students, and one that is especially harmful to low-income students and students of color,” said Wise. “Previous standards also expected too little from students and did not prepare them adequately for their futures. With these state-developed common standards and the assessments aligned with them, students, parents, and teachers will have a clear, consistent understanding of the skills necessary for students to succeed after high school and compete with the best and the brightest worldwide.”

*Common Core State Standards 101*, which includes a list of frequently asked questions and misconceptions about the CCSS, is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/CommonCore101.pdf>.



### **THE CONDITION OF COLLEGE & CAREER READINESS 2013: Approximately One-Quarter of High School Graduates Met College-Readiness Benchmarks in All Four Core Subjects Tested by ACT**

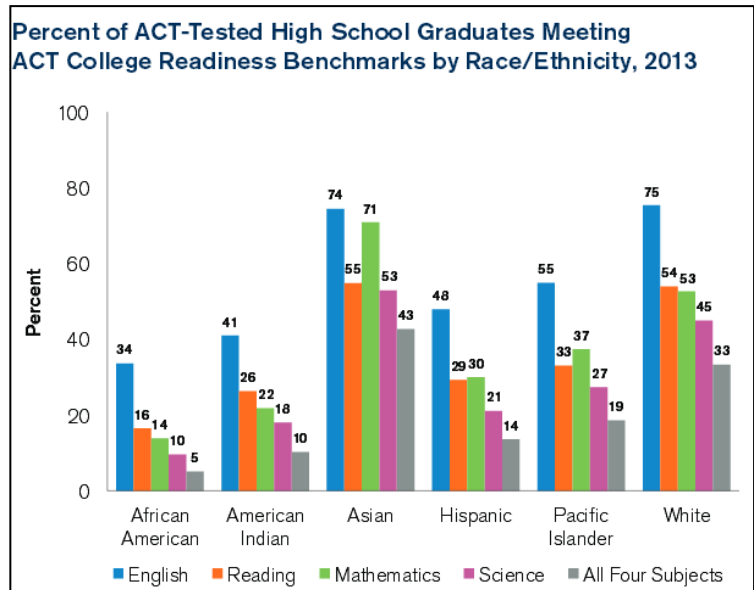
Only 26 percent of high school graduates from the Class of 2013 met all four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks, according to *The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2013*, released by ACT on August 21. As shown in the graph to the right, 64 percent of ACT-tested graduates met the English benchmark, compared to only 36 percent for the science benchmark; 31 percent of graduates did not meet any of the benchmarks.



“Once again, our data show that high school success and college readiness are not necessarily the same thing,” said **Jon Whitmore, ACT chief executive officer**. “Too many students are likely to struggle after they graduate from high school. As a nation, we must set ambitious goals and take strong action to

address this consistent problem. The competitiveness of our young people and of our nation as a whole in the global economy is at stake.”

When broken down by student subgroups, the data reveals that 43 percent of Asian graduates met all four benchmarks, compared to 33 percent of white graduates, 19 percent of Pacific Islander graduates, 14 percent of Hispanic graduates, 10 percent of American Indian graduates, and 5 percent of African American graduates. No more than 48 percent of African American, Hispanic, and American Indian students met any of the four benchmarks.



### ACT’s College Readiness

Benchmarks represent the minimum score students must earn to have about a 75 percent chance of earning a grade of C or higher in a typical credit-bearing first-year college course in that subject area. ACT research suggests that students who meet the benchmarks are more likely than those who do not to persist in college and earn a degree.

The composite score on the ACT of 21.1 for the Class of 2013 was lower than the 21.4 score posted by the Class of 2009. Approximately 54 percent, or about 1.8 million, of all 2013 high school graduates in the United States took the ACT during high school. From 2009 to 2013, the number of high school graduates who took the ACT increased by 22 percent.

*The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2013*, which includes findings for every state, is available at <http://www.act.org/newsroom/data/2013/index.html>.



### **DIGITAL BADGES: New Report From Alliance and Mozilla Examines How Digital Badges Can Expand Education and Workforce Opportunities**

Digital badges offer students the opportunity to pave their own learning pathways and allow employers to verify necessary workforce skills, a new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education and Mozilla finds. The report, *Expanding Education and Workforce Opportunities Through Digital Badges*, explores digital badges and how they can be used to improve student learning and outcomes, as well as expand vocational and interest-based skills for learners of all ages.

“Digital badges are making anytime, anywhere learning a reality for learners of all ages who want to pursue their interests with tangible results in real time,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Badges bridge the divide between formal and informal education, and they have the power to transform competency-based learning and hiring practices.”

*Expanding Education and Workforce Opportunities Through Digital Badges* defines badges as “credentials that represent skills, interests, and achievements earned by an individual through specific projects, programs, courses, or other activities.” A credible badge stores information online—through a digital hyperlink—about the associated skills, as well as what projects and tasks the badge holder completed to obtain it. Mozilla created an “Open Badges” standard that establishes an environment of credibility and verifiable skills surrounding the issuance and receiving of badges.

“The way we learn and the way we work have radically changed in today’s digital age, and we need the credentials that make sense for the way we live our lives today,” said **Erin Knight, senior director of learning and badges at Mozilla**. “Open Badges can connect learners to better jobs and opportunities, allowing them to increase skillsets and marketability. In return, employers can look beyond abstract credentials or self-reported resumes and get credible information on candidates—finding a better match, and unlocking a better future for all involved.”

The report argues that it is critical to have an open badge standard that ensures that all badges contain the same information, including criteria and evidence, and allows individuals to earn badges across various issuers, manage them in a collection, and display them across the web.

Organizations, K–12 schools, and institutes of higher education can create digital badges for various skills and competencies, the report explains. For the purpose of learning institutions, badges can convey a student’s core academic-content knowledge, as well as other twenty-first-century competencies, such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration.

Schools and districts are starting to leverage badges, not only to connect in-school and out-of-school learning, but also as a way to facilitate learning in more innovative and engaging ways, the report finds.

“Learning pathways differ from student to student, but badges can bridge those differences and provide students with opportunities to follow their interests, and connect what they have learned—at any time and place—to academic achievement, career success, and civic engagement,” Wise said.

The full report is available at [www.all4ed.org/files/DigitalBadges.pdf](http://www.all4ed.org/files/DigitalBadges.pdf).

***Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress*** is a free biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events 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. Contributors include Jason Amos, editor; Cyndi Waite; and Kate Bradley.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization that works to improve national and federal education policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century. For more information about the Alliance, visit [www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org). Follow the Alliance on Twitter ([www.twitter.com/all4ed](https://www.twitter.com/all4ed)), Facebook ([www.facebook.com/all4ed](https://www.facebook.com/all4ed)), and the Alliance’s “High School Soup” blog ([www.all4ed.org/blog](http://www.all4ed.org/blog)).