



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



“NOTHING MORE IMPORTANT THAN THIS”: Obama Visits Brooklyn High School to Push for Education Priorities, Including High School Redesign, High-Speed Internet in Schools, and Increased Funding

In his State of the Union address earlier this year, President Obama outlined three priorities in education—making high-quality preschool available to every child, making college more affordable, and redesigning America’s high schools. During the speech, he highlighted P-Tech, an early college high school in Brooklyn, where students graduate with both a diploma and an associate’s degree in a field related to computers or engineering. On October 25, Obama visited P-Tech to advocate for those three priorities, but he added a fourth—bringing high-speed internet to schools and libraries. (Click the image above to watch video of Obama’s speech.)



“We should give every student access to the world’s information,” Obama said. “When I went into the classroom today, young people were working off computers, and the problem is a lot of places, even if they’ve got computers, they’re not hooked up to wireless. So what we’re doing is having the federal agencies moving forward on a plan to connect 99 percent of America’s students to high-speed internet within five years.”

Obama also called on the U.S. Congress to pass a budget that invests in education. “A budget ... tells us what we think is important, what our priorities are,” Obama said. “If we don’t set the right priorities now, then many of [our students] will be put at a competitive disadvantage compared to other countries ... and the question can’t just be how much more we can cut, it’s got to be how many more schools like P-TECH we can create. That should be our priority.”

Later in the speech, Obama pressed even harder on the importance of investing in education and drew a contrast to the recent government shutdown. “After the manufactured crisis that Congress—actually, a small group in the House of Representatives—just put us through, shutting down the government and threatening to potentially default on our debt, I don’t want to hear the same old stuff about how America can’t afford to invest in the things that have always made us strong,” Obama said. “Don’t tell me we can afford to shut down the government, which cost our

economy billions of dollars, but we can't afford to invest in our education system. Because there's nothing more important than this."

Near the end of the speech, Obama mentioned a conversation he had with Leslieanne John, an eleventh-grade student at P-Tech who has already taken eight college classes and plans to be a lawyer.

"Leslieanne is clear-eyed about the challenges that the students here face," Obama said. "She put it in a way that a lot of people can relate to. She said, 'We see a whole bunch of craziness going on in the streets of Crown Heights sometimes.' But she also said that being here at P-Tech taught her something important: 'There's more for us than just the streets. At the end of the day, we've got to make something of ourselves.'"

"That's a message worth sending to Washington," Obama said. "No more games, no more gridlock, no more gutting the things that help America grow, and give people the tools to make something of themselves. That's what this is about."



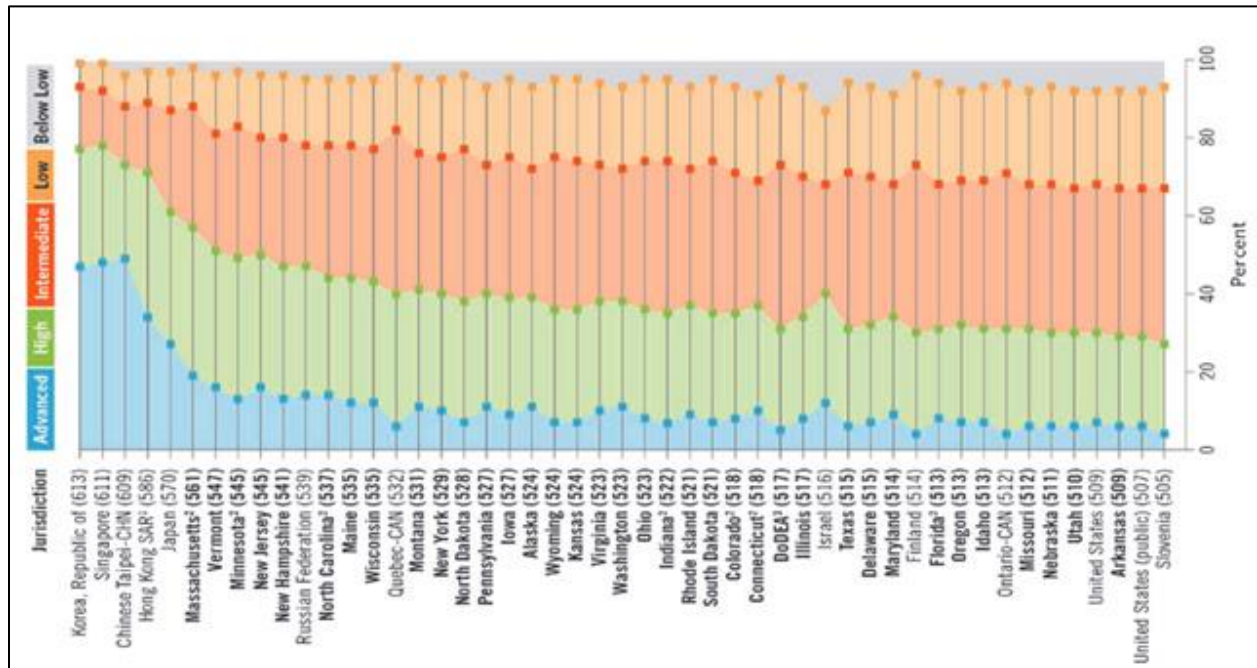
U.S. STATES IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT: U.S. Eighth-Graders' Math and Science Scores on Par with International Average, but Lag Leading Countries Internationally, Finds New NCES Report

When compared internationally, average scores for U.S. eighth-grade public school students in thirty-five states in math and forty-six states in science were higher than the international average, according to a new report from the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES). In math, the highest-ranking U.S. states ranked behind top-performers from the Far East, such as Korea, Singapore, and Japan. In science, however, Massachusetts ranked second and Vermont ranked fourth. The report, *U.S. States in a Global Context: Results from the 2011 NAEP-TIMSS Linking Study*, links states' performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to that of the thirty-eight countries and nine subnational education systems that participated in the 2011 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).

"We conducted this study because it's important to know how students educated in U.S. states are performing against international standards," [said NCES Commissioner Jack Buckley](#). "We found that most eighth graders in the U.S. are competitive in math and science when their predicted performances were compared to their peers from around the globe. Still, our leading states are behind the highest-performing countries. Even Massachusetts, a top U.S. performer in math and science, struggles to compete with top-performing countries."

The Republic of Korea ranked first in math with a score of 613, followed by Singapore (611) and Chinese Taipei (609). Massachusetts (561), the top-performing U.S. state, ranked sixth, while Vermont (547), Minnesota (545), New Jersey (545), and New Hampshire (541) all finished in the top ten. Ten U.S. states (Arizona, California, Georgia, Hawaii, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico, and South Carolina) were in line with the international average while six states (Alabama, District of Columbia, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and West Virginia) performed below the international average. The highest-performing nations and the

thirty-six U.S. states with an average eighth-grade mathematics score higher than the international average are shown in the graph below.



In addition to having average math scores below the top international performers, U.S. states have significantly fewer students performing at the advanced level. For example, nearly half (48 percent) of students in Singapore perform at the advanced level in math, compared to only 19 percent of Massachusetts’s students. Overall, 6 percent of U.S. eighth graders in public schools performed at the advanced level and 23 percent performed at the high level.

In science, Singapore ranked first with a score of 590, followed by Massachusetts (567), Chinese Taipei (564), Vermont (561), and the Republic of Korea (560). Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, and North Dakota placed in the top ten. In total, forty-six states ranked above the international average, two states (Arizona and California) were in line with the international average, while three states (Alabama, the District of Columbia, and Mississippi) were below the international average. Forty percent of eighth graders in Singapore performed at the advanced level—the most in the world and significantly higher than Chinese Taipei and Massachusetts, which tied for second with 24 percent. Overall, 9 percent of U.S. eighth graders in public schools performed at the advanced level while 30 percent performed at the high level.

In conducting the study, NCES used states’ NAEP scores to predict performance on TIMSS. Nine states (Alabama, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Indiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and North Carolina) participated in 2011 TIMSS at the state level and their actual TIMSS scores were used to validate the predicted results included in the study. Still, the report cautions that predicted TIMSS scores should not be interpreted as actual TIMSS scores.

The complete report is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/studies/pdf/2013460.pdf>.

SAVE THE DATE: Alliance and Nine National Education Organizations to Host Digital Event on Latest PISA Results on December 3

On December 3, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) will release the latest results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a test of reading literacy, mathematics, and science given every three years to fifteen-year-olds in the United States and more than seventy countries worldwide.

In conjunction with the release of the PISA scores, the Alliance for Excellent Education, in partnership with Achieve, ACT, Asia Society, America Achieves, Business Roundtable, College Board, Council of Chief State School Officers, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and National Center on Education and the Economy, will host a digital event that examines the results and their implications for U.S. education policy.

The event, which will be broadcast live over the internet, will feature a presentation on the PISA results by **Andreas Schleicher, Deputy Director for Education and Skills, and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary-General of the OECD**. Additionally, representatives from partner organizations will comment on the findings and the lessons for U.S. policymakers and educators.

Unlike the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which tests how well students have learned mathematics and science concepts and skills likely to have been taught in school, PISA was not designed to measure students' mastery of a school curriculum but, rather, to evaluate what students can do with the information they have learned—in other words, the kinds of abilities students ought to demonstrate and tests ought to measure.

Additional information will be made available in the coming weeks. In the meantime, check <http://all4ed.org/webinar/save-the-date-pisa-day/> for the latest updates.



INTERNATIONAL INCIDENT: U.S. Adults Rank Below International Averages in Literacy, Numeracy, and Problem-solving Skills, According to New OECD Survey

Adults in the United States rank in a tie for fifteenth out of twenty-three countries in literacy, twenty-first in numeracy, and tied for seventeenth in problem solving in technology-rich environments compared to other developed nations in the first Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Survey of Adult Skills. The new survey, also known as the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), measures the skill levels of sixteen- to sixty-five-year-olds.

“Larger proportions of adults in the United States than in other countries have poor literacy and numeracy skills, and the proportion of adults with poor skills in problem solving in technology-rich environments is slightly larger than the average, despite the relatively high educational attainment among adults in the United States,” the report notes.

In literacy, which the PIAAC defines as “the ability to understand and respond appropriately to written texts,” the United States had an average score of 270, placing it below top-performers

such as Japan (296), Finland (288), and the Netherlands (284), as well as the international average (273), as shown in the table below.

Country	Literacy Score	Country	Literacy Score
Japan	296	Republic of Korea	273
Finland	288	United Kingdom	272
Netherlands	284	Denmark	271
Australia	280	Germany	270
Sweden	279	United States	270
Norway	278	Austria	269
Estonia	276	Cyprus	269
Flanders-Belgium	275	Poland	267
Czech Republic	274	Ireland	267
Slovak Republic	274	France	262
Canada	273	Spain	252
International Average	273	Italy	250

With a score of 270, the United States placed at Level 2 (out of 5), which requires the respondent to make matches between the text and information. In the example from the text, a test-taker had to glean information from a website for the annual fun run for the Lakeside Community Club. Level 2 is below Level 3, where texts are often dense or lengthy and digital texts are complex, such as a bibliographic search from a simulated library website. Only 12 percent of Americans scored at the highest level, in line with the international average, but below the 22 percent achieved by Finland and Japan. One in six Americans scored below Level 2 in literacy—a larger-than-average percentage compared to other nations.

The United States fared worst in numeracy, or “the ability to use numerical and mathematical concepts” in the workplace, where only 8 percent of Americans reached Level 4, compared to 19 percent of adults in Japan and Finland. And with an average score of 253, Americans finished higher than only two other countries tested—Italy and Spain.

The third and final skill on which country participants were tested was digital literacy, or more formally, problem solving in information-rich environments, defined as “the capacity to access, interpret, and analyze information found, transformed, and communicated in digital environments.” For this category, the United States’s performance was similarly dismal, ranking ahead of only Poland.

“The first question these kinds of studies raise is, ‘If we’re so dumb, why are we so rich?’” **Anthony P. Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce**, told the [New York Times](#). “Our economic advantage has been having high skill levels at the top, being big, being more flexible than the other economies, and being able to attract other countries’ most skilled labor. But that advantage is slipping.”

While the United States performed below average in every category, the PIAAC finds some positive trends. For example, Americans participate in adult education and training at a higher rate than most other countries. It also finds that individuals scoring at higher literacy levels were more likely to participate in adult education and training, which ranges from basic literacy

programs to university education and high-level professional training. For example, more than 80 percent of adults scoring at Level 4 or 5 in literacy participated in adult education and training, compared to only 41.9 percent and 31.9 percent, respectively, for individuals scoring at Level 1 or below.

Some of the key takeaways from the survey center around the importance of high-quality education and the impact that socioeconomic status has on skills proficiency. Adults in the United States who did not graduate from high school scored an overall average of 230.3 points; those with a high school diploma averaged 260.9 points, and individuals with a college education averaged 291.4 points. In the United States, in particular, higher socioeconomic status had a direct correlation to better skill proficiency scores. The survey also finds that individuals with lower literacy skills tend to have poorer health outcomes than those with higher literacy skills. And in the United States, the odds of an individual reporting “fair” or “poor” health are four times greater for those with low literacy skills (below Level 2) than for highly skilled adults (Level 4 or 5)—is double the international average.

The survey also includes data based on race/ethnicity and finds that black and Hispanic individuals in the United States are “substantially overrepresented” in the low-skilled population. “While one in ten white adults scores below Level 2 in literacy, more than one in three (35 percent) black adults and nearly one in two (43 percent) Hispanics do so,” the report notes. “Similar patterns are observed in numeracy: 59 percent of black and 56 percent of Hispanic adults score below Level 2, compared to 19 percent of white adults.”

“Too many people are being left behind today,” [said OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría](#). “With effective education and life-long learning everyone can develop their full potential. The benefits are clear, not only for individuals, but also for societies and for the economy.”

The full U.S. results from the OECD Survey of Adult Skills are available at <http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/Country%20note%20-%20United%20States.pdf>.



A FIRST LOOK AT FALL 2009 NINTH-GRADERS IN 2012: New NCES Report Shows Low-Income Students and Students of Color Lagging in High School Course-taking and College Expectations

The percentage of students expecting to graduate from college increased significantly from the time students were ninth graders to when they reached eleventh grade, according to new results of a longitudinal study from the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES). At the same time, however, the study, formally known as the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSL:09), finds lower expectations for college graduation among low-income students and students of color, compared to their Asian and white peers. The study, which includes approximately 20,000 students in 944 public, charter, and private schools, is the fifth in a series of longitudinal studies that NCES began in 1972 with a cohort of high school seniors and have been continued with each new decade.

These findings, released last month and contained in *High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSL:09) First Follow-up: A First Look at Fall 2009 Ninth-Graders in 2012*, show students becoming more certain of their educational expectations. In 2009, the percentage of ninth graders

who were uncertain about their educational expectations was 22 percent—a percentage that had fallen to 11 percent two-and-a-half years later when those students were eleventh graders.

During the same time period, the percentage of students who expected to graduate from college increased from 56 percent to 61 percent, but significant differences in educational expectations emerged between white students and students of color and between affluent and low-income students. For example, 71.8 percent of Asian eleventh graders expected to graduate from college, compared to 64.2 percent of white students, 62.2 percent of black students, and 51.7 percent of Hispanic students. The results were even more stark when broken down by income, showing that 80.5 percent of students from affluent families (highest fifth of socioeconomic status) expected to graduate from college, compared to only 46.1 percent of students from low-income families (lowest fifth of socioeconomic status).

Although most students expect to complete college, the report raises questions about whether students’ high school courses would adequately prepare them to succeed in college. Overall, 36 percent of students reported enrollment in Algebra II while 21 percent enrolled in pre-calculus or calculus; 11 percent of students reported no math enrollment. When broken down by race/ethnicity, 53 percent of Asian students reported enrollment in pre-calculus or calculus compared to 24 percent of white students, 16 percent of Hispanic students, and 12 percent of black students.

Of the ninth graders surveyed, more than 96 percent were still in high school two-and-a-half years later. As shown in the table to the right, 91.1 percent of students were, as expected, in eleventh grade while 2.7 percent dropped out and 1.1 percent graduated early.

Status	Percentage
Dropped out of school	2.7%
Lower than Grade 11	1.7%
In Grade 11	91.1%
Higher than Grade 11	3.4%
Graduated early	1.1%

The longitudinal study focuses on understanding students’ trajectories from the beginning of high school into higher education and the workforce. It also examines students’ paths into and out of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields of study and careers; and the educational and social experiences that are related to shifts in plans or paths. Looking ahead, NCES will conduct a second follow up with the students in the study in 2016, when most sample members will be three years beyond high school graduation. Additional follow ups are planned until students at least reach thirty years of age.

The complete report is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2014360>.

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 Washington, DC–based national policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. For more information, visit www.all4ed.org. Follow the Alliance on Twitter (www.twitter.com/all4ed), Facebook (www.facebook.com/all4ed), and the Alliance’s “High School Soup” blog (www.all4ed.org/blog).